INTRAC

A Short Guide to Using Indicators

Frequently Asked Questions

This short guide provides an overview of the questions people ask related to indicators. The questions are as follows:

1. What is an indicator?
2. What different kinds of indicators can be used?
3. How specific should indicators be?
4. How should indicators be formatted?
5. How are indicators linked to baselines, milestones and targets?
6. What is the relationship between indicators and tools of data collection and analysis?
7. How should indicators be disaggregated?
8. How might indicators be selected, developed and refined?
9. What is triangulation, and why is it important?
10. How can indicators be linked between different levels?
11. How should the indicators in this paper be used?

1. What is an indicator?

Indicators are defined in many different ways by civil society organisations (CSOs). Perhaps the simplest definition is a *"piece of information that provides evidence of a change"*. However, it is important not to confuse <u>evidence</u> with <u>change</u>. An indicator should always be aligned with an output, outcome or impact statement that defines what sort of change is being sought. Indicators should not simply appear in isolation.

Many CSO indicators are designed to be used as **outcome** indicators – that is they provide evidence of change at outcome level. Sometimes that may be obvious (such as changes in the levels of children's learning or changes in the numbers of people employed by a small business). At other times the distinction is less clear. For example, if an organisation is running or directly funding a school then the ratio of teachers to children is a simple output indicator. However, if an organisation has helped influence local educational authority policy to increase its recruitment of teachers then the ratio of children to teachers becomes an outcome indicator. Context is key to what level the indicator sits at.

2. What different kinds of indicators can be used?

There are a number of different types of indicators. One key difference is between quantitative and qualitative indicators.

- *Quantitative* indicators are expressed as numbers, such as units, prices, proportions, rates of change and ratios. Some examples are:
    - # of targeted individuals / households reporting increased income
    - % of communities that are developing and following local action plans
    - Maternal mortality rates

- *Qualitative* indicators are expressed as words. For example:
    - Attitudes of citizens towards corruption in state and non-state institutions
    - Range of benefits or drawbacks resulting from access to financial services

Nigel Simester

- Interviewed children's views about changes in classroom methods in classrooms with trained teachers

It is important to remember that it is not the way in which an indicator is worded that makes it quantitative or qualitative, but the way in which the indicator is <u>reported</u>. If you report against an indicator using a number then it is a quantitative indicator. If you report against it using words, sentences, paragraphs or case studies then it is qualitative.

Both quantitative and qualitative indicators have strengths and weaknesses, and usually both will be needed within a project or programme. For example a detailed case study on changes in people's lives will reveal little unless there is some idea of how many people are involved. Similarly, measures of how many people are affected by a project often needs to be supplemented by descriptive information illustrating the differences in individual lives.

Key differences between quantitative and qualitative indicators

	Quantitative	**Qualitative**
Expression	Numbers	Words
Coverage	Provide information on width and scope of work	Provide in-depth information on changes at strategic points
Analysis	Analysed through statistical data methods	Analysed through summarising, reduction and scoring
Limitations	Often need to be interpreted through qualitative enquiry	Often apply only to a small number of people or situations, and therefore run the risk of being anecdotal

In addition to quantitative and qualitative indicators, there are certain other kinds of indicators which can be useful.

- ***Scoring and ranking*** indicators are quantitative indicators that are often generated from qualitative data. For example, if users of a service are asked to comment on their satisfaction with services, these may be converted into levels (such as 'very satisfied', 'satisfied', 'unsatisfied', and 'very unsatisfied'). An indicator such as *"% of users that are 'very satisfied' or 'unsatisfied'"* can then be used to assess progress.
- Simple **yes/no** indicators can be used to define whether something has happened or not. For example, *"a new resource centre is operational before the end of 2010"* or *"a new law enacted within a 5-year period"* are both types of yes/no indicator. They either have happened or they have not.
- In some circumstances, **pictures** can also 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 has changed.
- **Proxy** indicators measure change in a given phenomenon or process in an indirect manner. In other words, a proxy indicator does not measure something directly, but through another phenomenon. For example, if the objective of a project is to improve the capacity of a community development committee, there is no simple direct indicator. Instead, variables such as an increase in attendance at meetings or the number of new activities initiated by the committee may be indirect (proxy) indicators of progress.

- **Framing** indicators are used when you cannot easily predict the changes resulting from your work. They define the domain in which change is expected to occur. For example, "changes in the lifestyles of women" following an empowerment project". They should not usually be used to measure change, but should instead be used to provide illustrations of change that may be occurring. Framing indicators at programme level often rely on capturing and summarising more detailed indicators at project level.

3. How specific should indicators be?

Indicators may be pitched at many different levels, from the general to the specific. Some indicators are set so high as to be virtually outcome or impact statements. For example, in the box below 'increased access to improved water sources' might be seen as an indicator, but could also be seen as the objective of a programme. Other indicators, such as '# and % of households within 500m of a safe water point' may be so specific that they are only of use in a particular location and context.

Often we see for the most part, indicators that are specific enough to be clearly identified and used as indicators, but not so specific that they cannot easily be adapted to local contexts (see examples in bold in box below).

Different levels of indicators

- Access to water
- Increased access to improved water sources
- Access to water services that continue to function and deliver benefits over time through effective and joint management between local communities, governments, public and private service providers / utilities
- **# and % of households who have year round safe and equitable access to [an improved] water source.**
- **# and % of households over x metres from a protected water source**
- # and % of households within 500 metres of a safe water point
- % of people living on the left bank of the River Waveney that have access to safe water each day of the dry season

4. How should indicators be formatted?

Traditionally, a specific indicator would be expected to contain some of the elements described below:

- *Quantity*: 300 children
- *Quality:* 300 children achieving minimum higher school standards of learning
- *Time*: 300 children achieving minimum higher school standards of learning by the end of 2013
- *Place*: 300 children attending the Local Academy achieving minimum higher school standards of learning by the end of 2013
- *Baseline*: A rise from 100 to 300 children attending the Local Academy achieving minimum higher school standards of learning by the end of 2013

Although many CSOs still frame indicators in this way, a new industry standard is emerging, where indicators appear as neutral statements (e.g. '# of new business created', not '50 new business created'). These indicators should not contain specific numbers, and should not include words such as 'increase', 'reduction' etc. The intention is to ensure that indicators remain as neutral statements providing evidence of change, rather than targets to be achieved.

Along with many Bi Lateral Donors UK-based NGOs, now insists that all indicators be formatted in this way. Many NGOs develop indicators that have been designed to conform to this new industry standard.

A good indicator is still expected to be specific about time and place. It should be clear about which target groups are involved, and in which location, as well as the expected timescales for change.

5. How are indicators linked to baselines, milestones and targets?

If indicators are defined as neutral, donors often require appropriate baselines, milestone and target figures to be set alongside those indicators. In the case of quantitative indicators these appear as numbers. For example, the new DFID logframe expects indicators to be developed according to the following format.

Indicator	Baseline	Milestone 1	Milestone 2	Target
# and % of girls and boys in programme areas who report living free from violence, abuse and exploitation over the past year	20 (10%)	50 (25%)	70 (35%)	100 (50%)
% of children completing one year of basic primary education	60	65	70	80

When using qualitative indicators, baselines, milestones and targets should contain written (verbal) statements rather than numbers. Two examples of this are shown below – one for a capacity building indicator and another for an indicator of policy change.

Indicator	Baseline	Milestone 1	Milestone 2	Target
Capacity of supported partner to develop own project proposals	Partner has no ability to develop independent project proposals	Partner can develop proposals with assistance from supporting agency	Partner is capable of developing independent project proposals	At least two project proposals are favourably received by donor agencies
Policy on use of common grazing land exists	No policy supports the use of common grazing land by project beneficiaries. There is no consensus on changes required.	Local government officials have been persuaded to look into the issue, and attend meetings to discuss.	A new proposed policy is outlined and sent out for consultation.	Policy on use of common grazing land is adopted by local government.

6. What is the relationship between indicators and tools of data collection and analysis?

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. If a survey is designed to ask a question such as 'would you rate your engagement with a 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.

This is especially true for ranking and rating indicators. For example if an organisational assessment tool is being used to enable organisations to rank themselves according to how effective they are at mobilising local opinion it may be valid to set an indicator such as '# of organisations that increased their ranking by at least 1 level across at least 3 defined areas'. But until the tool has been developed it is impossible to set the appropriate indicators.

7. How should indicators be disaggregated?

Indicators, especially quantitative ones, should always be disaggregated where relevant. This means ensuring that information can be separated out to show difference in changes between target groups. Common target groups for disaggregation include gender, disability, marginalised groups, and people living with HIV&AIDS, etc. The indicator itself should be defined so as to show the disaggregation clearly (e.g. # of children, disaggregated by gender and disability).

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

Indicator	Baseline	Milestone 1	Milestone 2	Target
% of targeted children suffering from diahorrea in the past 2 weeks in programme villages, disaggregated by gender	50% (40% boys) (60% girls)	40% (35% boys) (45% girls)	35% (32% boys) (38% girls)	30% (30% boys) (30% girls)

8. How might indicators be selected, developed and refined?

There are many different ways in which indicators can be developed or selected.

- Indicators may be selected from scratch by brainstorming, sometimes consulting with a range of different stakeholders. Many organisations facilitate the involvement of community members in selecting indicators at some stage in the process.
- Some organisations have checklists of common indicators to select from.
- Some organisations require standard indicators to be set for specific programmes or thematic areas (especially if they wish to aggregate information).
- Some donors require specific indicators to be used by recipient organisations.
- There are sometimes specific guidelines (e.g. SPHERE indicators for programmes involved in emergency situations).

Frequently, whatever process you use you will end up with a large number of potential indicators – often far too many to use effectively. Once you have developed a range of possible indicators, it may be useful to ask a few questions in order to establish whether they are realistic or not. Sometimes the answers to these questions might lead you to discard potential indicators. This will help you to narrow your options, and ensure that any remaining indicators are realistic.

Questions to ask when refining indicators

- Will you be able to collect information on your indicator? If so, where will you get the information from?
- Is it likely to be accurate (credible)?
- How much will it cost to get the information in terms of:
    - staff time?
    - beneficiary time?
    - money?
- How often will you have to collect it?
- Does it require baseline information? If so, can you get this information?
- Do your staff have the capacity (or desire) to collect the information honestly and accurately
- How far can you attribute the indicator to your efforts?
- Will the indicator tell you anything you did not know before?
- Will it 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)?
- Will it allow you to share information with others to help their own projects and programmes?
- Might the indicator lead you to further investigation or enquiry?

9. What is triangulation, and why is it important?

When attempting to provide evidence of outcomes, selecting only one indicator, talking to only one group of people, or using only one method or approach can be dangerous. It is usually better to triangulate information. This means talking to different groups, using different tools and methodologies to access information, and/or using a range of different types of indicators to provide evidence of change. A well thought through portfolio of indicators and tools is always going to be better than choosing indicators in isolation.

In particular it is often worthwhile using both quantitative and qualitative indicators to provide evidence of change. For example, an indicator of lowered maternal mortality rates or increased education enrolment may be sufficient on its own. But other kinds of numeric indicators need to be supplemented by qualitative information if they are to make any sense. For example, numbers of policy changes, uptake of pilot studies, or number of organisations with increased capacity, are not indicators that make much sense on their own. They may give some idea of scale, but deeper information is required. For example there is a world of difference between adding something to the debate on a policy that is about to be implemented by a sympathetic government, or achieving deep and real support for a policy that was never before on a government's agenda.

Equally, qualitative indicators may be useful in assessing the depth of change in peoples' lives. But they often need to be supplemented by quantitative indicators that can help show the scale of change.

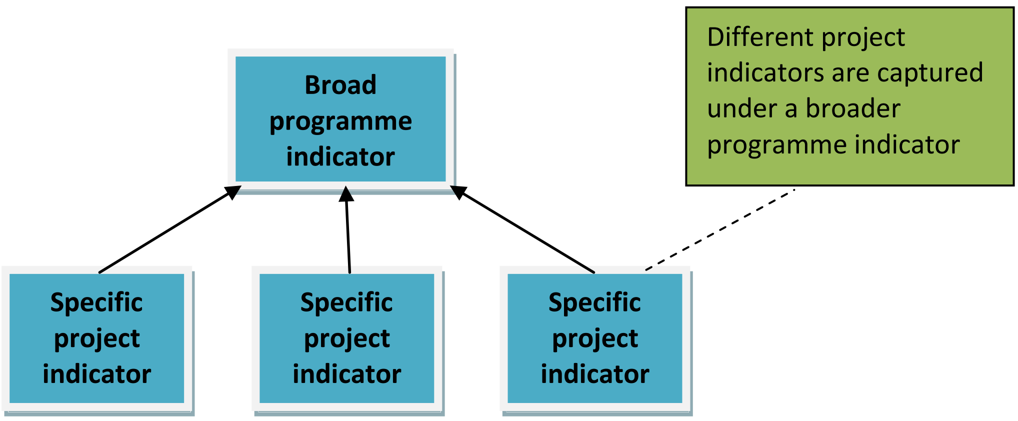
10. How can indicators be linked between different levels?

Many NGOs and CSOs attempt to link work at different levels through the use of indicators. This is most evident between project and programme levels. Sometimes, however, too little thought is given to who will collect indicators at different levels. There are a number of different ways of setting indicators to assess the progress or results of a programme. The two most common are described below.

a) *Using framing indicators at programme level.* These indicators cannot be collected directly, but are used to direct people at lower levels to where information might be found. For example, one indicator at programme level might be *"civil society's voice is heard in debates on resources and revenue governance"*. Nobody can collect information directly on whether civil society's voice is "heard", as it is not a tangible indicator. Instead, it relies on tangible indicators or evidence being produced from project level, such as:

   - *"government invited a CSO to attend a meeting to discuss policy"*
   - *"extracts from a written statement of a CSO were copied into a government policy document"*
   - *"6 CSOs attended a policy meeting with local government."*

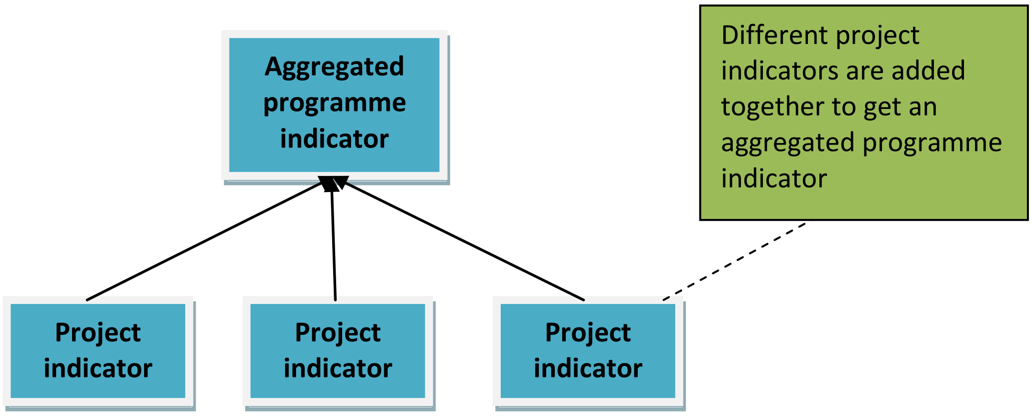
   These three tangible indicators at project level could all be collected under the one framing indicator at programme level, as illustrations of the type of changes that CSOs and/or partners are achieving.



b) *Aggregated indicators.* Indicators can also be added together at project level to provide an aggregated indicator at programme level (or higher). In this case, the indicator has to be defined in the same way at both project or programme level. Examples are:

   - *"numbers of children attending school"*
   - *"number of jobs created by small- and medium-sized enterprises"*
   - *"number of villages that are defecation free"*

These indicators are numerical and tangible, and can be aggregated from project to programme level. However, if you intend to aggregate indicators in this way then it is essential that all of the projects define and use the indicator in the same way as the programme (and also collect the indicator using common tools and approaches, over similar timeframes). Otherwise you will be adding together different numbers that may be meaningless. For example, in the last example above it would be meaningless to add together numbers from different projects if there were no standard understanding of what defecation free meant!



Aggregating indicators in this way is never as easy as it sounds, and it is essential that all parts of the organisation are working to the same definitions and standards. Organisations that attempt to count beneficiaries will already have experienced the significant challenges that need to be solved when adding together numbers from different places, over different timescales, and in different contexts.

The difficulties are significant when using output indicators. Even more complex difficulties are faced when organisations attempt to aggregate information at outcome or impact level. This is the Holy Grail for many INGOs that would allow them to measure performance across different sectors and regions. But the difficulties of such a task, especially when aggregating further upwards to country or organisational levels, should not be underestimated.

11. How should the indicators in this paper be used?

The best indicators are always the one that you as an organisation use to suit your own purposes, matched up to your own objectives and linked in with your own tools and methodologies. Unless using an industry standard indicator (such us under-5 morbidity rates) always consider how/whether you can **adapt** an indicator to suit your own purpose. Other organisations indicators are designed to stimulate thought – they are examples of what other people have found useful, and often need to be adapted to suit the context.

And remember ...

> ***"To measure whatever can easily be measured is okay as far as it goes***
> ***To disregard that which cannot easily be measured is artificial and misleading***
> ***To presume that what cannot easily be measured is not very important is dangerous***
> ***To say that what cannot easily be measured does not really exist is fatal."***

"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."