

Implementation Tips for USAID Partners

Sharing Resources and Knowledge Among the Global CSO Community

Monitoring and Evaluation 3 | 2018

Definitions

Indicator—A particular characteristic or dimension that will be used to measure change. Height is an example of an indicator.

Data—The actual measurement or factual information collected about an indicator. A measurement of someone's height as 5'7" is an example of a piece of data.

Baseline—Data collected about specific indicators before an intervention starts that will serve as the starting points against which to measure change.

Target—A specific, planned level of result for an indicator you expect to achieve within a defined period of time.

Monitoring—Periodic tracking (for example, daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, annually) of your project's progress by systematically gathering and analyzing data and information about what you are doing, whom you are reaching and whether your activities are being implemented as planned.

Managing Targets

Q. How do we review targets and make adjustments?

A. As you monitor progress and report on actual beneficiaries reached by your project, you may uncover significant discrepancies between the targets set in your workplan and the actual numbers you are reaching. Do not panic! This is a normal part of project management, especially when you are implementing newly designed interventions or expanding to a new geographic area with new subrecipients.

Successful project managers will not shy away from these discrepancies. Taking the time to better understand the underlying reasons for target shortfalls and developing a plan to adjust your project and/or reset its targets is a normal part of the project cycle.

Discrepancies between Targets and Actual Results

Discrepancies between targets and actual results are to be expected. As the project manager, however, you need to decide whether a particular discrepancy is "significant" enough to warrant further investigation and action.

The first question to ask is, How dramatic is the difference between the target and actual result? Is it 10% more or less than expected? Is it 50% more or less than expected? You will need to decide what 'significant' means in the context of the target you are examining. For example, if your target is only 50 people for a particular indicator, a difference of 10% may well warrant further investigation. If your target is 500,000, you may require a higher percentage to trigger action.

In addition, other factors might impact your decision to investigate this discrepancy further. For example, how central is the specific activity that demonstrates the discrepancy to your overall project? Is the activity intimately linked to several other activities? Or is it a small, stand-alone piece? Based on this analysis, you will need to determine whether action is required or not.

References

[Monitoring and Evaluation Toolkits](#)

[Preparing a Performance Management Plan \(PMP\)](#)

[Baselines and Targets](#)

[Data Quality Standards](#)

[Data Quality Assessments](#)

[Handbook on Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation](#)

Successful project managers take the time to understand the underlying reasons for target shortfalls and develop a plan to adjust their project and/or reset the targets.

Reviewing Targets

If you determine that actual results deviate significantly from the targets set, you will want to discover the reasons. While there are numerous possible causes, most fall into three areas:

- problems with faulty or mistaken intervention design assumptions,
- poor project implementation, or
- data quality errors.

These areas may be managed by different staff members—a technical lead for intervention design, a subrecipient for implementation, and an M&E specialist for data quality. The process for reviewing target discrepancies should include all these people, perhaps led by the project director.

Problems with Intervention Design Assumptions

When you designed your project, you made a number of assumptions. You also collected data about specific indicators before the intervention started to establish a baseline or starting points against which to measure change.

Your assumptions and baseline data were used to develop your targets. Factors taken into account likely included:

- demographic data, including population size, age distribution and prevalence rates (for example, rates of HIV/AIDS prevalence, etc.),
- social and cultural factors, such as language, cultural appropriateness and acceptance,
- project effectiveness estimates, such as estimates of the number of people who will change their behavior or be open to accepting your services.

In general, the more reliable the data used, the more accurate your targets. For new projects or projects expanding into new areas, however, the underlying demographic data and social and cultural assumptions may not be as reliable as for established projects. Therefore, you can expect discrepancies to arise between targets and actual results.

Problems with Implementation

Sometimes the source of the discrepancies is project implementation rather than design. This could include:

- slower than expected project start-up,
- budget problems, such as higher than expected costs or delays in securing matching funds,
- human resource problems, such as the inability to find qualified personnel or challenges recruiting and retaining volunteers, or
- training problems, such as an ineffective trainer or ineffective training materials.

If you are starting a new project or expanding a project into new areas, discrepancies between targets and actual results are expected to arise.

Data Quality Problems

What if your intervention design was sound and its implementation is going smoothly, but there are gaps between your targets and the actual performance data? The problem could be with the data itself. Examples of data quality problems include:

- *Under-counting results.* For example, volunteers do not record everyone reached.
- *Double-counting results.* Higher-than-expected results can occur from counting project beneficiaries multiple times.
- *Data entry problems.* Perhaps the data are being gathered properly but are somehow not getting accurately entered into your system.

Developing Solutions

Once you have identified discrepancies, you will want to look for the cause(s) and identify solutions.

If you find multiple reasons for the discrepancy, do not try to address all of them at one time. Focus on the one or two whose resolution will have the greatest impact; that is, generate the best return on investment of time, personnel and resources. If possible, pilot test your changes before implementing them project wide.

If you must adjust your intervention, be sure to put processes in place to test and validate the adjustments. Also, closely monitor progress and document the changes made. If you are using an intervention also used by other subrecipients or recipients elsewhere, share your experience so everyone benefits from the lessons learned. Below are some suggestions about how to move forward to address specific types of issues.

Looking at Program Design

Target shortfalls due to intervention design problems are often the most difficult to pinpoint and can be the most challenging to resolve. Try to rule out all other problems first.

Making Implementation Adjustments

Sometimes, adjusting your implementation strategies can get your project back on track. To avoid pitfalls, consider the following:

- If you adjust your budget, get donor permission, especially to re-budget between budget categories.
- Pilot test your changes whenever possible. Give proposed fixes a few months to work before you try to speed things up to make up for target discrepancies. You can always request additional time later.
- Document adjustments so mistakes will not be repeated.

If you find multiple reasons for discrepancies between targets and actuals, focus on the one or two whose resolution will have the greatest impact.

Addressing Data Quality Issues

Address any data quality issues you discover immediately.

For example, if the problem is under-counting, start by ensuring everyone involved has a clear and shared definition of exactly what/whom to count for each indicator.

Ensure that your team understands the indicator. Sometimes indicators are clearly defined by USAID. Sometimes minimum standards are set by the local Mission. Sometimes your organization is expected to set its own minimum standard for when to count an individual as having been “reached.” If everyone on your team does not agree on who meets the threshold to be counted, miscounting the number of beneficiaries may result.

If you have reported results to USAID that may have contained errors, contact your AOR to discuss how the past reports might be corrected.

Adjusting Targets Upward

Although “discrepancies” generally refer to shortfalls between targets and actuals, your project may also require adjustments if your actuals are significantly higher than your targets. For example, higher-than-expected results could affect budgets or other related activities. In addition, higher actuals may be an indication that double counting is occurring. Therefore, keep an eye out for unusually high actuals and be prepared to investigate and adjust if necessary.

Adjusting Targets Downward

In some cases, your findings will leave you little choice but to adjust your targets downward. Because you are contractually obligated to reach those targets, you will have to work with your AOR to make these changes.

In doing so, consider some of the following:

- Will you be reducing your targets for the current year or reducing your overall targets (meaning, for the entire project)? Whenever possible, propose solutions to make up current shortfalls in future years.
- Do you have a good reason for reducing your overall targets? A shortage of time is not sufficient. Could a no-cost extension help you meet your original goals? If the answer is still “no,” you will want to develop a well-documented, evidence-based reason to support your reduction request.

Your targets are likely tied to your budget. Therefore, when you propose adjusting your targets, you should also address the impact this will have on your budget.

For More Information

For this or other issues of *Implementation Tips*, please visit www.NGOConnect.net. The Web site is a dynamic and interactive portal dedicated to connecting and strengthening CSOs, networks and CSO support organizations worldwide.

Funding for this publication was provided by the U.S. Agency for International Development, under the Strengthening Civil Society (SCS) Global Leader Award. Its contents, managed by SCS Global, do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the U.S. Government.

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When adjusting your targets, try to pinpoint the corresponding assumption(s).

Example: Your women's micro-lending project is underperforming and you believe that part of the reason is there are fewer eligible women in the catchment area than you assumed. Develop a formula that shows this and use it as the basis for a request to modify your targets.

In your workplan, you probably tied the proposed targets to your budget. Therefore, when you propose lowering your targets, you should also address the impact on the budget. If you cannot reach the proposed targets in one area, try to see if you can re-budget to increase your targets in another project area.

Conclusion

Reviewing targets, making project adjustments and assessing data quality are natural and necessary parts of the project management process. Each time you refine your project model, applying lessons learned, you strengthen your project. As a result, the next time you implement in a new area or work with a new subrecipient, your assumptions will be better and your targets will be more accurate.

