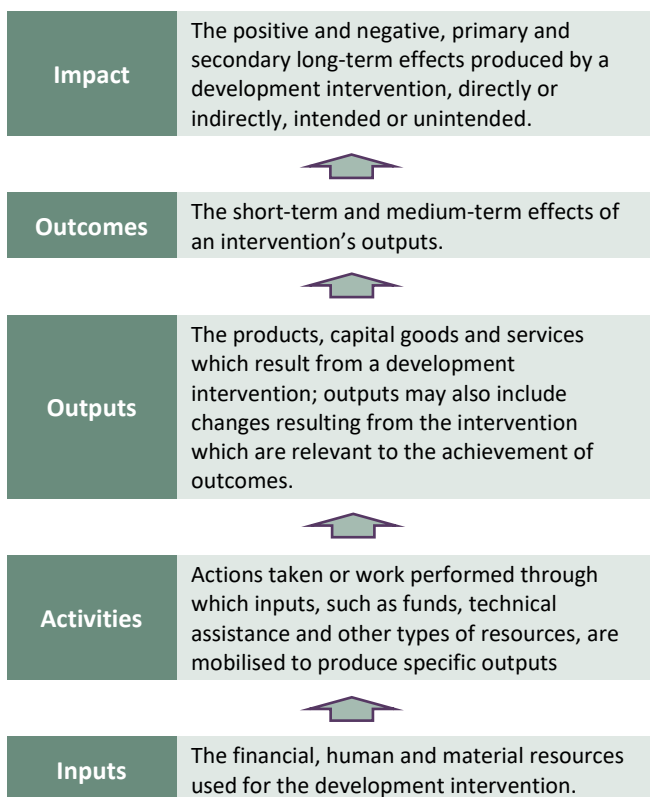# OUTPUTS, OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

Outputs, outcomes and impact are terms used to describe change at different levels. Outputs are the products, goods and services delivered by a development intervention. They are designed to produce outcomes – the short- to medium-term effects of an intervention – and eventually impacts. Although the terms are in common use, they are not defined or applied consistently across different agencies.

Most organisations understand the difference between the things they do (activities) and the ultimate changes they wish to help bring about (impact). But the distinction is not always helpful, as there may be many steps between an organisation's activities and the desired impact. The results chain (see figure 1) attempts to categorise these steps by breaking them down into manageable stages – inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impact.

The definitions below were first developed by OECD DAC in 2002 (OECD, 2022). But it is important to note that different organisations use different definitions, and the definitions are not always applied consistently.

Enhancing farmers' productivity: a worked example

➔ *Inputs:* seeds, transport costs, staff time, etc.
➔ *Activities:* travelling to farms to deliver seeds to the farmers; organising and conducting training on how to plant the seeds.
➔ *Outputs:* seeds distributed; farmers trained.
➔ *Outcomes:* farmers plant the seeds; the seeds grow into crops; the crops are harvested; the crops are eaten and/or sold.
➔ *Impact:* better long-term standard of living for farmers and their families.

Figure 1: The Results Chain

Impact	The positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended.
Outcomes	The short-term and medium-term effects of an intervention's outputs.
Outputs	The products, capital goods and services which result from a development intervention; outputs may also include changes resulting from the intervention which are relevant to the achievement of outcomes.
Activities	Actions taken or work performed through which inputs, such as funds, technical assistance and other types of resources, are mobilised to produce specific outputs
Inputs	The financial, human and material resources used for the development intervention.

Another term commonly used is **results**. Results are defined by OECD DAC as *"the outputs, outcomes or impacts (intended or unintended, positive or negative) of an intervention"* (ibid). Most organisations only use the term to describe actual achievements, although some use it to describe predicted change as well.

A simplified diagram of how all these different terms relate to each other can be found in figure 2. It will not satisfy every organisation or situation, but it can work as a rule of thumb for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practitioners.

Figure 2: Fitting the Terminology Together

Objectives are predicted …

| Outputs | Outcomes | Impact |

Results are realised …

In this results chain, inputs are used to implement activities. Activities lead to services or products delivered (outputs). The outputs start to bring about change (outcomes). And eventually the outcomes contribute to the desired impact. See the box above for a worked example.
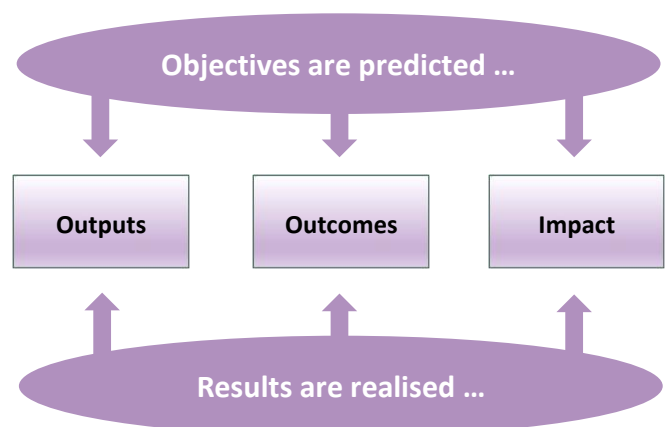
Working with outcomes

Ongoing assessment of outcomes is an important part of many M&E systems. This is because outcomes provide early information on whether a project or programme is on

track. For instance, if a deliverable of a project is the provision of seeds to farmers, an early outcome might be that farmers plant the seeds. This does not mean the project or programme has achieved its desired impact, but it means that it remains on track. If the farmers are not planting the seeds, project staff know that the ultimate impact is not likely to be achieved, and adjustments to the project are required.

On the other hand, if project staff only attempted to measure the ultimate impact of the project at the end, and then found that farmers and their families had not improved their living standards because they had not planted or harvested the seeds, it would be too late to do anything about it.

Any M&E system or approach designed to feed into decision-making needs to assess outcomes regularly. The danger otherwise is that M&E focuses only on what is being delivered, based on an assumption that if products or services are delivered properly they will automatically bring about the desired change. This can rarely be assumed.

Most projects or programmes contain several different levels of outcomes. The example provided is based on the theory that increased seed use will lead to improved yields, better harvests, increased cash for farmers, and ultimately improved livelihoods. A good M&E system would usually attempt to identify all the different levels of outcomes, and assess them on a regular basis.

> If organisations are comfortable with their own definitions of the different terms there is no need to read the remainder of this paper. However, problems sometimes arise when different agencies, such as donors and civil society organisations (CSOs) that receive their funding, use different definitions or interpretations. The next two sections of this paper focus on some of the challenges that may arise because of this.

Potential Confusions

Although in theory the different terms used in the results chain are easy to distinguish, in practice it can be more difficult. There may be confusion in three areas (see figure 3 for a worked example based on a water project).

Firstly, there is sometimes confusion between activities and outputs. Some activities are clearly not outputs; for example taking photographs of possible locations for a new water point, talking to different villagers to find out where it might be situated, negotiating with potential suppliers of parts, etc. But when it gets to the level of 'digging a well' it is easier to see how there might be confusion. The act of 'digging a well' is clearly an activity whilst the actual well dug is often considered an output because it is a product (deliverable) of a project or programme. This confusion is surprisingly common. Many projects or programmes feel unfairly treated if their outputs (or output indicators) are criticised for being too activity-based.

The second confusion is between outputs and outcomes, and here the difference can be more subtle. Some output definitions only include the deliverables of a project or programme. However, other definitions interpret initial changes as outputs, such as enhanced knowledge or understanding following a training course, or community organisations engaging with government following community mobilisation meetings. The OECD DAC definition, for example, allows that an output "*may also include changes resulting from [an] intervention which are relevant to the achievement of outcomes*" (ibid).

There is no universal solution to this difficulty, and M&E practitioners need to deal with it on a case-by-case basis. Even when organisations have very clear definitions and guidelines on the difference between outputs and outcomes, people may still interpret the terms inconsistently.

The third confusion is between outcomes and impact, and here it is largely a matter of judgement. Again, a great deal depends on the definition. For example, the OECD DAC
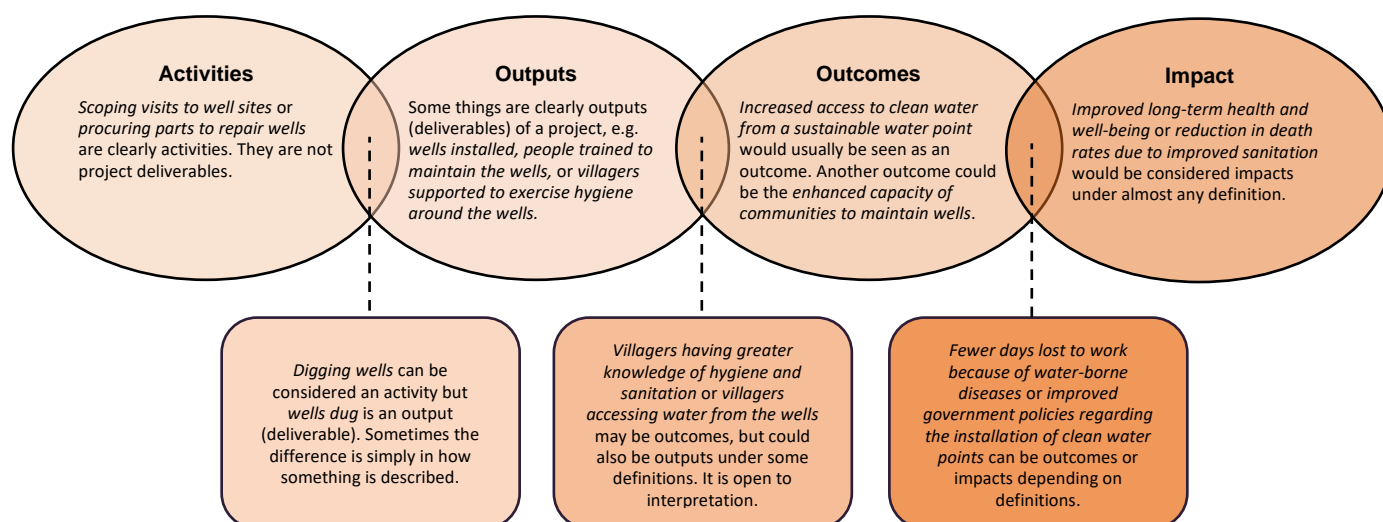
Figure 3: Overlap Between Different Terms

Activities

Scoping visits to well sites or *procuring parts to repair wells* are clearly activities. They are not project deliverables.

Outputs

Some things are clearly outputs (deliverables) of a project, e.g. *wells installed, people trained to maintain the wells,* or *villagers supported to exercise hygiene around the wells.*

Outcomes

Increased access to clean water from a sustainable water point would usually be seen as an outcome. Another outcome could be the *enhanced capacity of communities to maintain wells*.

Impact

Improved long-term health and well-being or *reduction in death rates due to improved sanitation* would be considered impacts under almost any definition.

Digging wells can be considered an activity but *wells dug* is an output (deliverable). Sometimes the difference is simply in how something is described.

Villagers having greater knowledge of hygiene and sanitation or *villagers accessing water from the wells* may be outcomes, but could also be outputs under some definitions. It is open to interpretation.

Fewer days lost to work because of water-borne diseases or *improved government policies regarding the installation of clean water points* can be outcomes or impacts depending on definitions.

Figure 4: Different Perspectives on Outputs and Outcomes

		Output	Outcome	Impact
Case 1: An organisation carries out eye operations directly		Output: Eye operations carried out to a high standard	Outcome: Improved eyesight for patients	Impact: Improved quality of life
Case 2 An organisation trains eye surgeons within a partner agency	Output: Eye surgeons trained	Outcome: Eye operations carried out to a high standard	Outcome: Improved eyesight for patients	Impact: Improved quality of life

definition (*'positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended'*) allows for long-term changes in institutional capacity or policy change to be classed as impact. However, the preferred definition for many CSOs is *"lasting or significant change – positive or negative, intended or not – in people's lives brought about by an action or a series of actions"* (Roche, 1999, p21), which focuses more on change at individual or household level.

The preferred solution of the author, in a desire for a less complicated life, is to define outputs as the services or products delivered that are largely within the control of an agency; impact as the lasting or significant changes in people's lives brought about by a development intervention or set of interventions; and outcomes as everything in between.

Different perspectives

One thing that often confuses development practitioners is how something can be an output (deliverable) and an outcome (change) at the same time, depending on different perspectives.

For example, if an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) carries out capacity strengthening with a local partner organisation it is reasonable to consider the training as an output, and any improvement in the partner's work, such as increased engagement with marginalised groups, as an outcome. But from the perspective of the partner the engagement with marginalised groups is an output of its work. The engagement could therefore be seen as both an output and an outcome at the same time.

This is a dilemma for many large organisations and donors that try to draw up large sets of indicators and classify them into 'output' and 'outcome' indicators. In case 1 in figure 4 above, an organisation might carry out eye operations in project locations to a high standard (outputs) in order to improve sight (outcomes/impact). But it might also train local partners to carry out operations to a higher standard (case 2) in which case the training is an output and the carrying out of effective operations by partners is an outcome. So what at first sight seems to be a clear output (deliverable) – the carrying out of effective eye operations – may be an outcome of an organisation's work in different circumstances.

Consequently, it is not possible to generically classify *'eye operations carried out to a high standard'* as either an output or an outcome. It is always dependent on the context, and the perspective of the agencies concerned.

Within projects and programmes it is usually wise not to worry too much about whether a change is formally classified as an output, an outcome or an impact. Rather, it is more important to make sure that the results chain from activities through to the eventual impact is logical and makes sense.

"There is no objective way of saying whether something is an output or an outcome. It depends partly on your perspective."

Further Reading and Resources

Further information on the difference between outcomes and impact can be found in the M&E Universe paper on impact assessment. Another related paper in the **planning and M&E** section of the M&E Universe deals with setting objectives. These papers can be accessed by clicking on the links below.

▶ Setting objectives

▶ Impact assessment

References

▪ OECD (2022). *Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results-Based Management: 2nd Edition – prepublication version.*
▪ Roche, C. (1999). *Impact Assessment for Development Agencies.* Oxford, Oxfam/NOVIB.

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