PROGRAMME INDICATORS

Some programme indicators are designed to be collected directly at programme level. Others are designed to capture, summarise or aggregate information collected from projects or partners within a programme. In these cases it is important to be clear about how information should be transmitted between the different levels, and who is responsible for making sure it happens.

Indicators are developed, collected, analysed and reported in most social development projects. They can also be developed and used at programme level. Programmes may range from a collection of a few projects working on a common theme to large global, regional, country or sector programmes.

Sometimes, programme indicators are not designed to be collected directly, but instead rely on information that is collected at project or partner levels, and then transmitted up to programme level. If a civil society organisation (CSO) plans to use this kind of programme indicator, it is important that it develops processes that enable information to be transmitted between the different levels of the programme. The risk otherwise is that nobody takes responsibility for collecting the indicators, and the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system for the programme falls into disuse as a result.

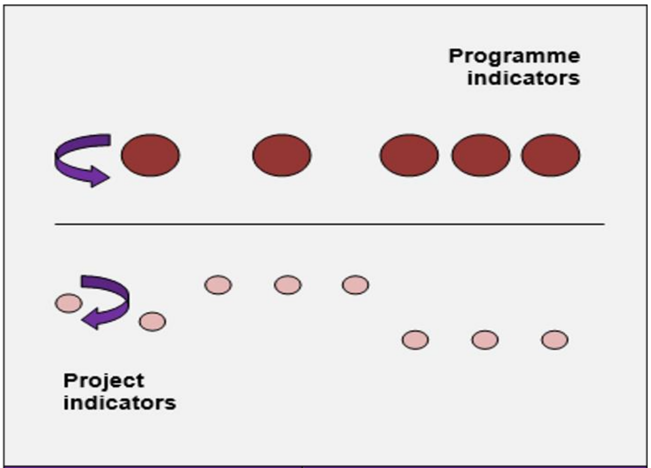
The five different cases outlined in this paper illustrate ways in which programme indicators can be linked to project indicators. The principles can be applied within any type of programme, ranging from a small programme working in one locality through to a large global, regional, national or sector programme. The first three cases are the most common.

There is no standard terminology for describing different types of programme indicators. They are known by different names in different organisations.

Case 1: Independent indicators

In the first case, programme and project indicators are collected independently. Programme indicators are collected by programme staff using programme resources. In the example shown in the diagram above, the *% of people in an area living within 2km of a protected water source* could be collected at programme level via a survey, or by using a system of water point mapping. Different projects might then define, collect and analyse their own indicators, such as the *number of water points installed* or *number of water committees supported*. Even though the results at programme level may depend partly on activities carried out at project level, the two sets of indicators are not formally linked.

Case 1: Independent indicators



Programme indicators	Project indicators
• % of people in an area living within 2km of a protected water source	• # of water points installed • # of water committees supported

Case 2: Framing or basket indicators

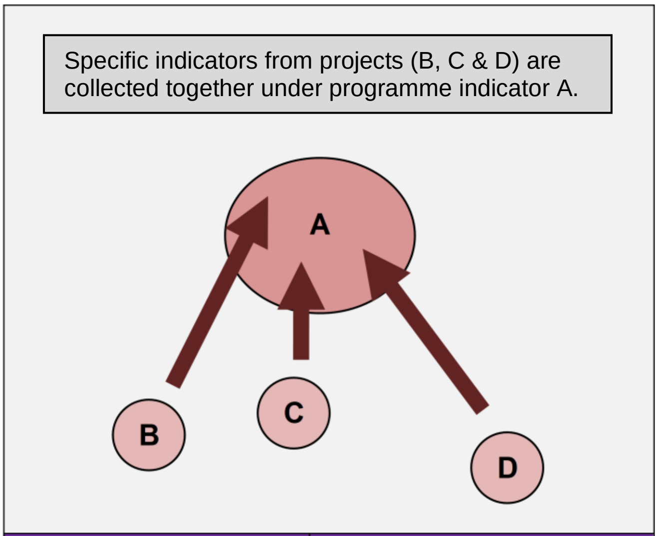
Framing or basket indicators, sometimes also known as bucket indicators, are not specific and cannot be collected directly at programme level. Instead they are used to identify broad areas or domains of change. More specific indicators at project level are then captured and summarised under the framing indicators.

In the example shown on the following page, the programme-level framing indicator is *CSOs influence government practices at local levels*. This kind of indicator cannot be collected directly. Instead, it relies on specific, tangible indicators being developed and reported at project level, such as:

- *# of times government invites CSOs to attend meetings to discuss policy.*
- *Evidence of CSO submissions being copied into government policy documents.*
- *Successful lobbying of local government by CSO.*

Evidence produced through these three project indicators could all be collected under the one framing indicator at programme level, thereby providing examples of the type of change that a programme is achieving.

Case 2: Framing or basket indicators



Programme indicator	Project indicators
• CSOs influence government practices at local levels **(A)**	• # of times governments invite CSOs to attend meetings to discuss policy **(B)** • Evidence of CSO submissions being copied into government policy documents **(C)** • Successful lobbying of local government by CSO **(D)**

It is important to note that framing indicators are rarely used to *measure* programme change. Instead, they are used to generate examples or illustrations of the type of changes that are occurring within a programme. A framing indicator is basically a way of collecting together and summarising a number of specific changes under a common theme.

Project indicators feeding into a programme-level framing indicator may be either quantitative or qualitative. In fact, they need not necessarily be indicators at all, and information on unexpected or negative changes can also be mapped onto a framing indicator. One advantage of using framing indicators is that it leaves project staff free to collect indicators which are useful to them, without worrying about complying with programme requirements. Indeed, there is no theoretical reason why project staff should be aware of the existence of the programme-level framing indicator at all!

Programme framing indicators may be defined as qualitative indicators as shown in the example above (*CSOs influence government practices at local levels*). However, some programmes may choose to turn them into quantitative indicators by counting the number of cases that occur. In that case the framing indicator could equally well be defined as:

- *# and description of cases where CSOs influence government practices at local levels.*
- *# of examples showing how CSOs have influenced government practices at local levels.*

Case 3: Aggregated indicators

Indicators from different projects can also be added up at programme level to generate an aggregated indicator. In this case the indicator must be defined in exactly the same way at both project and programme level (see diagram below). An example of an aggregated indicator is *# of farmers trained in land management*. Aggregated indicators are always quantitative.

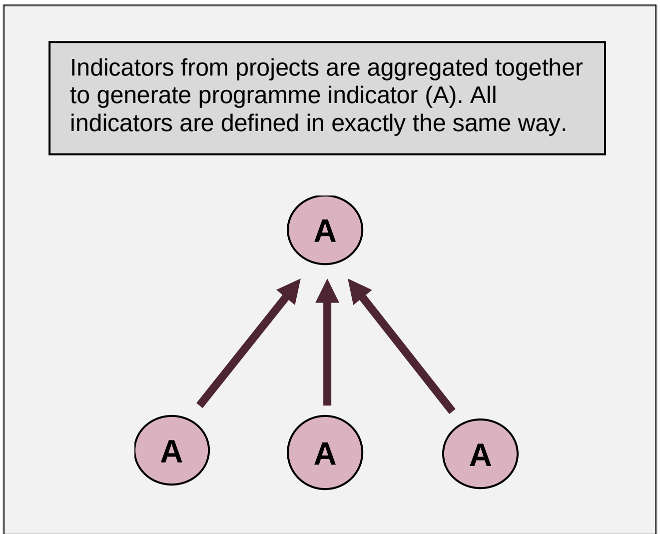
If a CSO intends to use an aggregated indicator, it needs to ensure that the indicator is applied in exactly the same way throughout all the projects contributing to the programme indicator. In practice this means that:

- the same indicator definition needs to be used;
- all relevant projects need to collect information on the indicator;
- the same (or similar) tools and methods need to be used to collect the information; and
- the quality of information collection needs to be consistent.

The risk otherwise is that different numbers are added together to produce a meaningless total. In the example provided above, it would not make sense to add together numbers from different projects if there were different interpretations of what was meant by 'farmers', 'training' or 'land management'.

If a programme wants to aggregated impact- or outcome-level indicators there are two more conditions. First, the change covered by the indicator needs to be assessed over similar timescales. And second, the contribution of projects to the change should be broadly similar. For example, it would not make sense to add together an indicator such as

Case 3: Aggregated indicators



Example indicators at both programme and project level
• # of local government decisions influenced by CSOs • # of children (boys/girls) enrolled in new schools • # of farmers with increased crop yields > 30% • # and % children 0-23 months who are underweight (weight for age), by gender

Conditions for aggregating indicators from project to programme level

For all indicators:

- ➔ The same indicator definitions need to be used
- ➔ All relevant projects need to collect information on the indicators
- ➔ The same (or similar) tools and methods need to be used
- ➔ The quality of information collection needs to be consistent

For impact- and outcome-level indicators:

- ➔ The change covered by the indicator needs to be reported over similar timescales
- ➔ the contribution of projects to the change should be broadly similar

 # and % of women who are engaged in meaningful employment from two different projects if one was based on in-depth, direct support from a CSO over many years, and the other involved limited, indirect capacity building support in a project that was only just beginning.

CSOs often want to use aggregated indicators to enable them to summarise performance across different interventions in different locations. However, aggregating indicators is never as easy as it sounds. In practice, it is essential to ensure that indicators are comprehensively defined at the start of a programme, so that all project staff can work to the same indicator definitions.

A major implication of this approach is that all relevant partners and projects need to be told (or persuaded) to use the indicators, whether or not they are of any use to them in their own work. At best, this can result in unnecessary administrative burdens. At worst, it might mean projects and/or partners do not bother to ensure that information is collected accurately.

Aggregation is more commonly applied at activity or output levels; for example counting the numbers of schools built, credit groups supported, or intended beneficiaries reached across a portfolio. It is less commonly used at outcome level, and is used mainly in situations where there are industry standard indicators, and when the time gap between outputs and outcomes is relatively short (e.g. survival rates for operations or weight increase in nutrition programmes).

It is much harder to aggregate indicators if trying to measure complex or intangible outcomes, or if there are long timescales between activities carried out and desired changes. Consequently, aggregation is rarely applied at outcome level in complex sectors of work such as governance, conflict resolution or the mobilisation of civil society, where outcomes (and therefore indicators) need to be more specific to the context, and contribution is harder to assess.

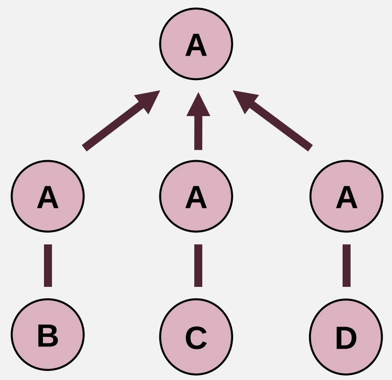
Case 4: Translated indicators

Translated indicators are less common, and can be seen as a halfway house between cases 2 & 3. Projects still report on different indicators (as in case 2). However, those indicators are then 'translated' into an aggregated indicator (as in case 3) later in the process. This can either be done by the project staff themselves, or, more commonly, later on by programme staff.

In the example shown below, three different project indicators are all converted into a common indicator before being aggregated. For instance, programme staff could measure or estimate the number of households with access to newly installed water points (indicator B). It should also be possible to measure or estimate the number of households being served by wells treated for contamination (indicator C). It might be harder to estimate the number of households with increased access to an improved water source as a result of increased awareness of hygiene around water sources (indicator D), but it would still be possible. After translation, the three numbers could then be aggregated under the common programme indicator *# of households with access to an improved water source* (A).

Case 4: Translated indicators

Different indicators from projects (B, C & D) are translated into a common indicator (A) and then aggregated to programme level.



Programme indicator	Project indicators
• # of households with access to an improved water source **(A)**	• # of safe water points installed in region **(B)** • # of wells that have been treated to remove contamination **(C)** • # of communities with increased awareness of hygiene around water sources **(D)**

CSOs use translated indicators within social development in many different ways. Some of the most common are as follows.

- In cost-benefit analysis or social return on investment, different kinds of social benefits are routinely translated into monetary values to enable aggregation and comparison.
- Health programmes often convert different indicators collected within projects into DALYs (disability-adjusted life years) – understood as the additional number of years of healthy life for a person.
- Rating indicators may be used to aggregate and compare performance based on different project indicators. For example, project performance can be translated into a RAG (red, amber, green) rating, or expressed on a scale of '1' to '5', and then aggregated into a programme indicator.

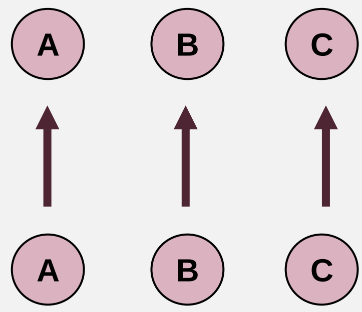
The main advantage of using translated indicators is that some level of aggregation can be achieved even if project indicators have not been defined or collected in the same way from the start of a programme. However, using translated indicators is not always easy, and can require a lot of time and energy. As with aggregation, it should not be undertaken lightly.

Case 5: Cluster indicators

In the final case, some programmes define indicators that are essentially project indicators which have been brought up to programme level. This is often done in programmes which bring together a group of projects for marketing or communications purposes, or for management convenience. In the example provided in the diagram opposite, three different indicators collected by projects have been brought up to programme level. Each indicator, when reported at programme level, only covers the work of an individual project.

Case 5: Cluster indicators

Different indicators from projects (A, B & C) are brought up to programme level and reported as programme indicators.



Programme indicators	Project indicators
• # and description of government policies that have been influenced by CSOs **(A)** • # of advocacy campaigns designed and implemented **(B)** • # of meetings held with local government officials **(C)**	• # and description of government policies that have been influenced by CSOs **(A)** • # of advocacy campaigns designed and implemented **(B)** • # of meetings held with local government officials**(C)**

"If a CSO wishes to link indicators across different levels of a programme then it needs to create the mechanisms to do so. It will not happen on its own. Indicators are not magnets."

Summary

Programme indicators are not always defined and used in the same way as project indicators. In some cases a great deal of thought needs to go into developing programme indicators and ensuring they are linked to indicators at project or partner levels. Programmes often use a combination of the five cases described in this paper to provide a range of information, some of which is reliant on information coming through project indicators and some of which can be collected independently at programme level.

Further reading and resources

Further information on how to aggregate and summarise information across different levels of an organisation can be found in the M&E Universe paper on aggregation and summarisation. This can be accessed by clicking on the link below.

Aggregation and summarisation

Indicators

The material in this paper is mostly taken from a paper called *"Summarisation of Portfolio Change"* by Nigel Simister, published in 2016. This can be found on INTRAC's website at https://www.intrac.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Summarising-portfolio-change-results-frameworks-at-organisational-level.pdf.

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