

# Back to the Drawing Board: How to improve monitoring of outcomes

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**How close are humanitarians to monitoring actual outcomes in humanitarian action? Where does the sector want to be? And what do humanitarians need to do to get there?**

The ALNAP Secretariat has conducted background research into some of the most recent thinking and practical attempts by organisations to monitor outcomes, and would now like to share this learning and stimulate discussion on lessons learned and issues arising from these attempts. Outcomes can be understood as ‘likely or achieved short-term and medium-term effects of an interventions’ outputs’ (OECD-DAC, 2002).

## Background

Recent ALNAP research found that organisations are seldom able to measure outcomes and when they do, they are not always able to interpret them in a way that is meaningful for future programming.

Unless we as humanitarians understand the effects of our programming we cannot know if what we are doing works and if it is the right thing to do – instead of merely tracking whether we are delivering the work planned. Most organisations want to be able to make claims about the effects of their outputs, how these effects compare between similar interventions in different places, and how they change and develop over time.

To this end, a number of organisations have started investing in systems and tools to help monitor outcomes. Several organisations have already travelled quite far with their thinking and have invested resources to set out frameworks for monitoring outcomes, whilst others have only just jumped on the train. Few organisations know what others have tried – and whether or not these approaches seem to be working. ALNAP Members have expressed that they would like to learn from what other organisations in the sector have tried so far, to either improve their current framework or to inspire the design of a future one.



## Issues arising

Many organisations now seem to be paying much more attention to measuring outcomes. But current aspirations for outcomes monitoring are high, varied and therefore difficult to meet.

As demands for outcomes measurements are being pulled in different directions, monitoring systems are currently overstretched. Whilst dealing with these competing demands, many have lost sight of how to measure outcomes in the first place. In order to reach holistic and meaningful analysis of outcomes achieved, organisations need to be able to situate the programme against what's happening around it or understand the full set of changes that individual affected persons are experiencing.

Research for this paper found certain key issues arising from current practice: what should be measured (looking at definition,



Issues arising from current outcome monitoring practice: What to measure, how and what it takes to get this done. Photo credit: Flickr/Tlang

formulation of outcomes, and sectoral silos); how these things can or should be measured (looking at possibilities for aggregation, open-ended inquiry and data management systems); and what it takes to get this done (including the levels of investment and parallel internal advocacy required).

## Defining outcomes

For example, one key issue for discussion is how practitioners define and understand outcomes. Here are three areas where issues arise:

1. Short and medium-term outcomes in humanitarian settings can look quite different depending on the setting. Although it would be reductive to draw a hard distinction between the two types of outcome based on timeframe, there is certainly a difference between an immediate, directly attributable change and an indirect result that would take longer to develop and could have been influenced by many other external factors. For example, a measurement of 'the number of a target population using the non-food assistance they received to meet other household needs' is different from 'the number of a target population that are more resilient as a result of the non-food assistance they received'.

In practice, appropriate time periods for effect to take place differ between humanitarian contexts and are relative to how long an organisation has been active in the response. For example,

the sudden onset scenario of the cyclone in Mozambique is completely different to the complex emergency in Yemen.

2. Humanitarian organisations increasingly work in protracted crises and humanitarian-development nexus environments (such as Jordan and Uganda) and design more resilience-based programming, so longer-term outcomes are also seen. Some organisations recognise the multiple timeframes and longer-term contexts by adding a third category of 'longer-term' outcomes to their use of the definition.
3. The current definition also groups together both more simple and complex outcomes. For example, a reduction in medical complications during birth as a result of women being provided with antenatal care is a direct result. In comparison, a reduction in the occurrence of gender-based violence as a result of men and women being provided with psychosocial care is a more complex and indirect behavioural change.

The risk with the broad definition is that organisations do not need to collect information on medium, longer-term or even more complex outcomes to meet donor accountability requirements. As such, with tight timeframes, resources and technical capacity in humanitarian settings, country offices often choose to only measure shorter, direct outcomes for their projects as these are often seen as easier and cheaper methods to implement.

Unfortunately, collecting many of these and adding them up does not enable us to understand longer-term results. Over time, we are not accumulating enough data on indirect effects to contextualise and understand the story behind and around these outcomes.

Naturally, the thresholds between these definitional categories might look different depending on the context. And direct outcomes, such as a reduction in medical complications, are still just as important to capture as indirect outcomes. But if we tease these apart, practitioners will be more likely to measure the right thing with more appropriate and relevant methods and tools.

## Next steps

If current monitoring systems and practice are unable to tell us the story of outcomes, it might be time to ask ourselves if, in fact, we need to re-think how we approach these measurements. This could mean many things, such as moving away from pre-defined indicators, using cross-sectoral measurements, re-defining outcomes, looking at collective levels of measurement or building long-term evidence gathering models (and finding new ways to fund them). Can we break the glass ceiling of monitoring convention?

ALNAP's new paper *Back to the Drawing Board* and other M&E research is available at [alnnap.org/me](https://alnnap.org/me).

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ALNAP Senior Research Officer Amelie Sundberg  
E-mail: [a.sundberg@alnap.org](mailto:a.sundberg@alnap.org)  
Tel: +44 (0) 20 7922 0349

