Here's how to build a results framework to ensure effective project implementation

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What is a results framework?

A results framework is a planning, communications and management tool that emphasises on results to provide clarity around your key project objectives. It was introduced in the mid-1990s by USAID as a new approach to monitor its programs throughout the agency. A good results framework is based on a good mix of logic, analysis, standard theories in the technical sector, and the expertise of on-the-ground managers.

The purpose of a results framework is similar to that of a log-frame or the theory of change. It helps practitioners to plan and understand the various facets of a project intervention and demonstrate it in a clear graphical manner. A results framework uses a chain of series to display project hypothesis, activities, processes and the intended changes that are expected to occur throughout the project cycle to achieve the project objectives. It leads to the identification of performance indicators at each stage in this chain, as well as risks which might impede the attainment of the objectives.

The elements of the chain of series are laid out under different levels and connected by a cause-and-effect relationship. In short, a person looking at a results framework would be able to understand the basic theory for how key project objectives will be achieved.

The naming of the results framework levels could vary, but most organisations use input, activity, output, outcome and impact.

Common terminologies that are used to represent the levels in a results framework.

Designing the results framework starts during project identification phase, but the design is improved and adapted throughout the project cycle. But before a team develops a full-fledged results framework, it is essential to have a shared understanding of the problem the project is intending to solve. It is also important to have a series of hypotheses of how the project inputs will lead to the desired outcomes, along with a knowledge of the type of evidence required to assess progress toward results.

Still confused? Let’s try to explore the concept a little further.

Understanding the cause-and-effect relationship

So, what is the cause-and-effect relationship among levels? In simple words, our project ‘input,’ which includes the initial resources we invest into our project in the form of money, staff, facilities or equipment, fosters our ‘activities.’ Activities, on the other hand, are actions that organisations undertake to deliver project goals.

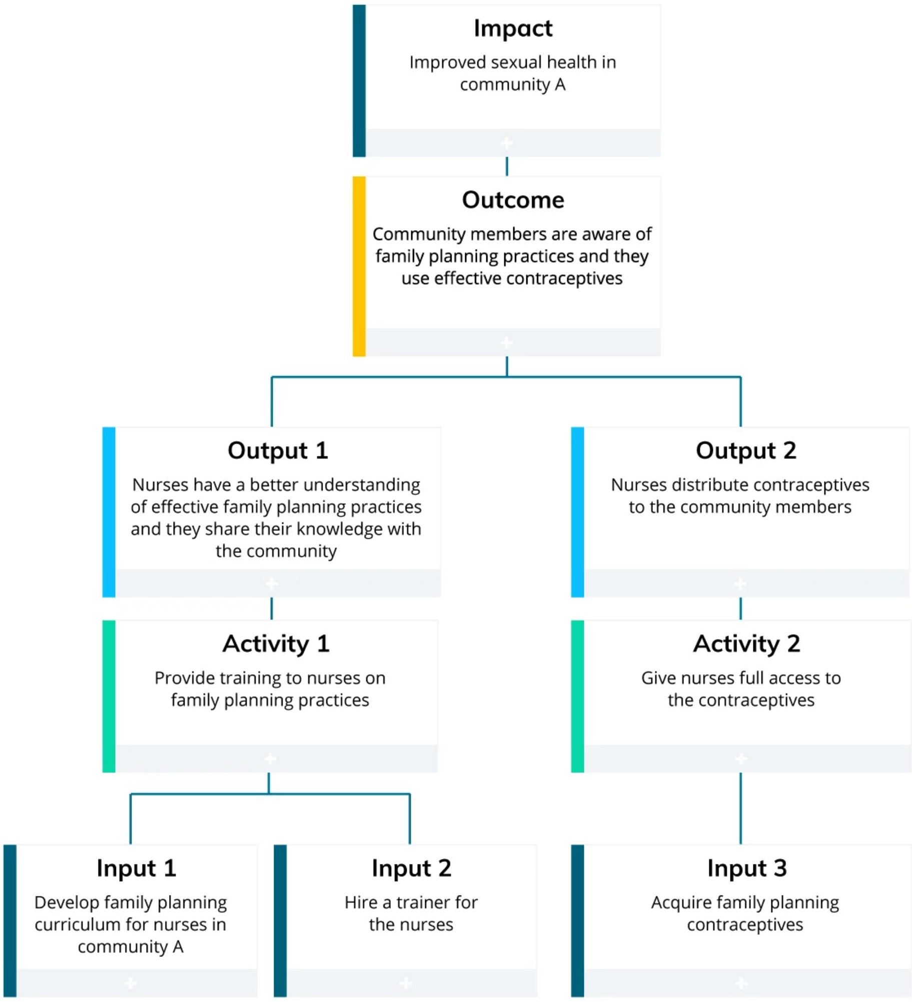
Our actions or ‘activities’ would then trigger changes that results in our ‘outputs.’ So it means that ‘outputs’ are products and services that are delivered by our team as a result of our actions. Moving on to the next phase, we would expect our outputs to subsequently stimulate changes that results in our ‘outcome.’ Outcomes are modified behavior, conditions and situations of individuals, communities, businesses, or organisations that results from our project outputs. Depending on the nature of the intervention, outcomes can be short term, medium term or long term.

Lastly, the changes at our ‘outcome’ level would be expected to trigger our project ‘impact.’ Impact is a long term effect or behavioral change in a community (or even society) that our project attempts to create – this is our overarching project goal.

The key question to ask at every level is – “what result did our intervention in this particular level achieve?” It is a good idea to revisit each level frequently to make sure that our assumptions hold true and that it is logical and realistic for our strategy to be valid.

Let’s take a simple example

Let’s assume that our organisation has developed a project to implement in ‘Community A.’ Our overall project goal is to improve the sexual health of the community members. Let’s look at how we can lay out our objectives and intended results into different levels on a results framework.



The results framework displaying the cause-and-effect relationship among different levels of the Community A project.

If we take a closer look, we will notice that our project ‘inputs’ include developing family planning curriculum for nurses in Community A, hiring a good trainer and acquiring family planning contraceptives. Our project cannot begin until we take these first steps. Once we have a full-fledged curriculum, a good trainer and other required resources in place, we are ready for our next step, which is leveraging our resources to train the nurses on family planning practices and giving them access to effective contraceptives – this makes up our ‘activities.’ You may notice that both ‘inputs’ and ‘activities’ are under our control and their success depends on our efforts and performances.

Moving on to the next level, we assume that our ‘activities’ will result in our ‘outputs.’ In this case, our ‘output’ would be nurses having an improved knowledge on family planning practices and them sharing their knowledge with the community through good services. Another possible output could be nurses distributing contraceptives to the community members. This will subsequently bring us to our next assumption, where we expect community members to acquire a decent understanding of family planning practices through the trained nurses and that they start using the contraceptives they have received. If everything goes as planned, this outcome will lead us to our final impact, which is our overarching program goal – the overall sexual health of Community A will improve.

One important thing to remember is – a results framework must be current for it to be effective. Therefore, we should consider revising it when our results are not achieved within an expected time-frame, or when our critical assumptions are no longer valid. Likewise, it can also be updated when we notice that the underlying development theory or critical problems with policy, operations, or resources were not adequately recognised.

Another important point to keep in mind is – building a results framework alone is not enough to solve the problems that our project sets out to tackle. It is indispensable to measure our intervention at each level to track our real progress and to identify and analyse issues that are causing delays or unexpected results.

How do we measure progress at each level?

How do we know whether our activities have resulted in the intended outputs or our outputs have resulted in the intended outcome and so on? This is where well-defined performance indicators come into play. Indicators are vital to M&E, as these are the key for successful tracking of project changes or problems. Indicators allow program staff to measure up-to-date characteristics of the program's success at each level and assess whether those results are in line with program targets and expectations.

To put it simply, in order to find out whether providing training to the nurses on family planning practices have resulted in our desired outputs, we can measure the changes by counting the number of nurses trained and how many of them performed well in their exams and so on – these are our indicators. Every level of our results framework has its own set of corresponding performance indicators.