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FROM ACTIONS TO IMPACT: A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE ACTIVITY REPORTING

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Inaccurate activity reporting can hinder project success, leading to misinterpretations of progress and ineffective decision-making. This document addresses this challenge by providing a practical framework for designing and reporting on activities in a way that accurately reflects project progress and impact. We will discuss best practices for defining measurable activities, selecting appropriate indicators, and ensuring that reporting clearly links activities to project goals and outcomes.

Work plans are structured through activities. Reporting includes both activities and the overall project results. However, discrepancies in the type of report (evidence) chosen for reporting an activity can often result in the opposite effect: a well-executed activity may not appear effective in the report.

This is not the only problem. Similar errors also occur in describing the activity itself, its alignment with the actual content, and its relevance to the planned objectives of the program or project. There might be activities that are formulated independently of the project outcome, appearing isolated or even unnecessary.

This document has been created to prevent such reporting discrepancies and misalignments.

Activity Title and Description

The title and substantive description of an activity should correspond to the goal it aims to achieve. This can relate to the general project objective or to specific tasks, workflows, or components. (Figure 1).

If the project aligns with a Theory of Change framework, it should match the level of change. (Figure 2)

For long-term activities, progress measurement should be clear, but the results are typically linked to a specific program implementation level and a level of change.

The connection to the general goal and/or intermediate results should be explicitly articulated in the activity description and, if possible, in its title. (Figure 2)

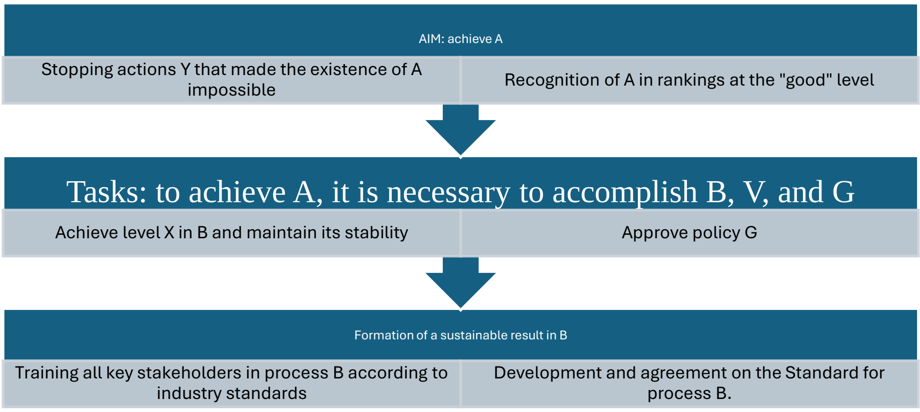

Fig. 1 **Example: Linking Activities to Achieve Goal A, showing different levels of impact**

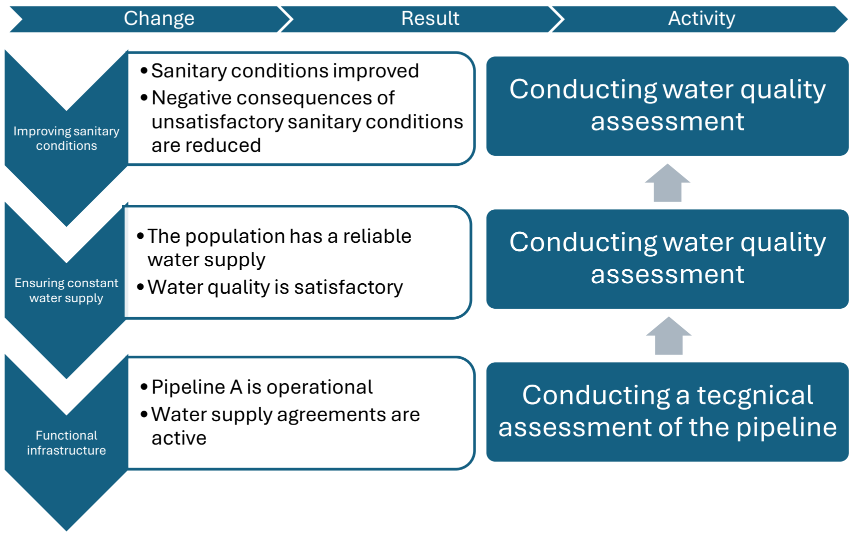

Fig. 2 **An Example of activity levels contributing to a single goal**

Best practices involve formulating activities through a logical link between the framework of planned programmatic changes and the map of expected outcomes.

If an activity does not connect to the logic of the expected changes framework, it may be considered questionable in terms of project feasibility.

When there is no clear connection to the chain of changes, it is recommended to use the principle of definition: the activity title is formulated with a specific focus on what will:

- Be achieved at the outcome level (Outcome) – emphasizing the expected changes.

• Be done/produced at the output level (Output) – specifying measurable results.

• Be expended/allocated for resource-level activities (Input) – highlighting resource utilization.

The activity title may also reference the project's primary goal, but this should not be the main focus in naming the activity.

Measurability

All activities must lead to measurable results.

When the result is not immediately obvious or is part of a larger process, index-based measurement practices can be applied: create a result measurement level consisting of outcomes from several activities as components.

Measurability is tied to project indicators.

Indicators can be those reported to donors or external stakeholders, as well as internal indicators used for better management of internal processes.

Selecting Indicators

Indicators must unambiguously reflect the level of result change in understandable and universal measurement units.

An indicator should be tied specifically to the process and activity. If generalized, an indicator represents a detailed measurement of a repetitive activity that has been theorized and standardized.

For widespread and typical results, established activities and standard indicators already exist.

Thus, if a program consists of typical chains of changes broken down into standard activities, it makes sense to select from standard indicators.

Using standard indicators is often a default recommendation from donors as it provides greater predictability for project actions.

However, specific activities in unique or context-driven programs may require additional description and justification of result measurability, leading to the creation of custom indicators.

Custom indicators implemented in programs can evolve into standard indicators for the implementing organization or donor over time.

Levels of Measurability

Every project, action, or program can be represented within the following chain of levels:

• Resources required to execute the action to achieve the project's goal.

• Actions leading to measurable outcomes that can be immediately calculated, often as intermediate results.

• Actions resulting in measurable changes in the project's operational area, partially describing progress toward the goal.

- Actions achieving the goal, often represented as sustainable, long-term results that have become the new norm.

See Figure 3

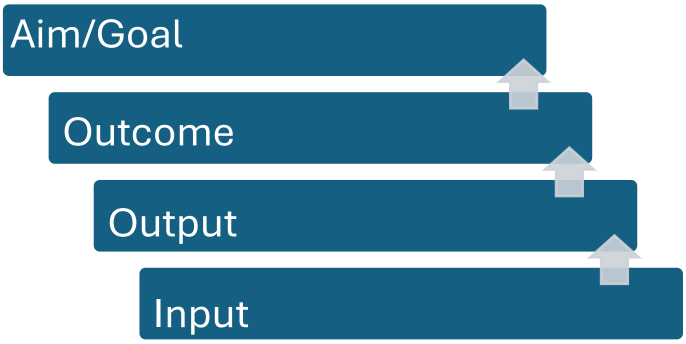

Fig. 2 **Levels of framework**

The description of levels emphasizes the approach of using the action component, as this provides a clearer understanding of the scope for applying the indicator. In a very simplified sense, an indicator represents a highly concentrated practice of applying a clear and predictable action.

Indicators can exist at all levels of a project, demonstrating both the process and the current results. Naturally, there is always a desire to showcase changes and the achievement of goals. (Figure 4) For this reason, the most common practice is to use a small number of high-level indicators, or at least indicators of achieved results, for reporting to donors.

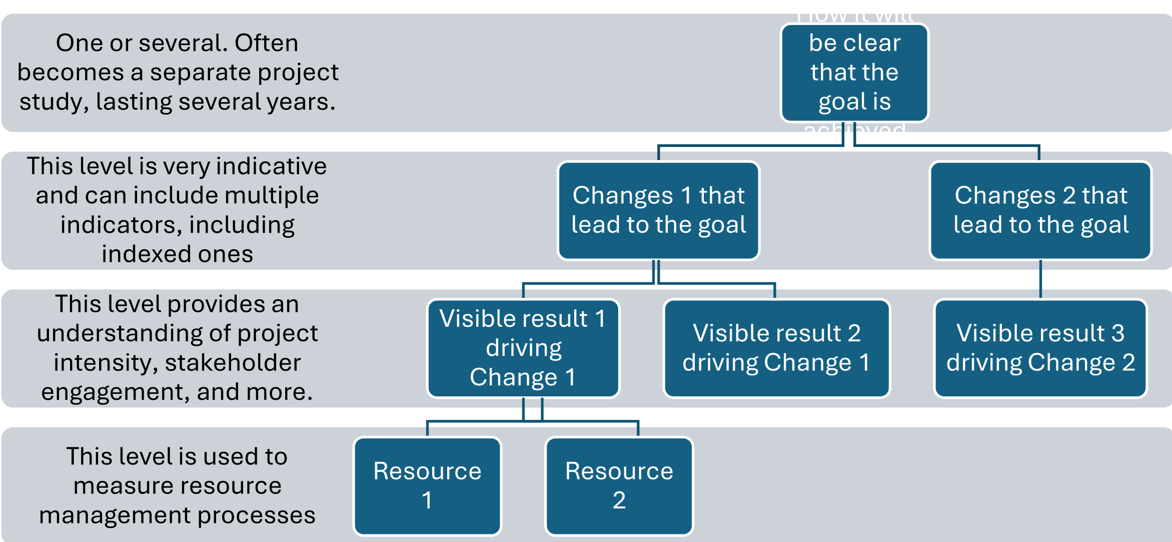

Fig. 3 **Direct relationship between levels of framework**

However, it is important to recognize that real changes, i.e., progress beyond the level of achieved results, take time and are often the outcome of accumulated actions. Moreover, most indicators at the level of changes are complex and often require additional research, with some being subjective and not always reflecting reality accurately.

Most often, donors are reported the level of changes, but it is advisable to include the level of achieved results in the report, which can be aggregated into an index indicator to demonstrate the project's intensity and effort level.

Additional / Optional Indicators

To ensure transparency and manageability, every activity must be fully described: from the logic of forming expected changes to how it will be understood that the goal has been achieved.

In addition to mandatory indicators for donor reporting, it is reasonable to include indicators initiated by the team in each project. For process improvement, it is best to add:

- Indicators one level below the reported result, which are components of or influence the expected result.
- Indicators at the level of achieved results (Output), especially when the horizon for achieving outcome-level results (Outcome) is distant.
- Indicators at the level of achieved results (Output), especially when outcome-level results (Outcome) are generalized or highly subjective.
- Indicators at the resource level (Input), especially when it is necessary to control the minimum resource usage threshold or in cases of specific features (e.g., procurement within the project’s implementation country).

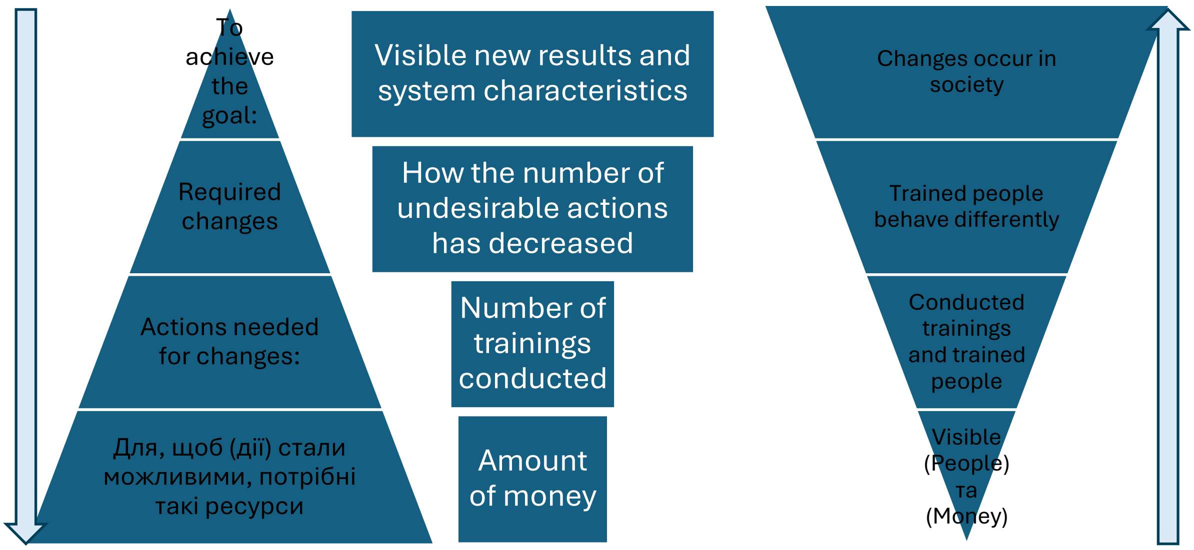

Fig. 4 **An Example of Formulating Changes and Expected Results in the Context of Measurement Points**

Additional Considerations

Often, situations arise during a project where those responsible for certain areas begin to observe additional results or changes. This is characteristic of complex, long-term programs or those whose activities impact complex social systems. These changes or additional results may vary but generally represent outcomes that were not planned but emerge as secondary or additional results of program actions.

Example: the goal of a project activity is to combat petty corruption in medical institutions. The program did not initially consider addressing relationships between patients and insurance operators. However, an evaluation found a direct correlation between reducing petty corruption and increasing insurance service usage. Although it is not certain this is a program impact, it aligns with the project's hypothesis: patients redirect their expenses from informal (high, one-time) to formal (lower, regular) payments. Therefore, the project team is interested in adding an indicator to monitor engagement with insurance services to investigate the phenomenon further.

In this case, existing data would be analyzed from an additional perspective and could be included in the report (e.g., narrative) at the team's initiative.

Contextualizing Existing Indicators

There is often a need to refine or contextualize existing indicators. Scenarios that justify such actions include:

- The indicator does not reflect changes or process dynamics, or conversely,
- Indicator data fluctuates dynamically in both directions.

Example 1: *the legislative activity support process is intensive and resource-consuming, yet the result indicator remains stagnant. The team finds it necessary to investigate the indicator because it does not reflect the effort and outcomes, including societal changes, which remain unreported and invisible.*

By analyzing the indicator's structure, it was found that it only reflects fully implemented documents, focusing on approved and enacted items while excluding the process and effort levels from visibility. Analysis revealed the following:

- *Work is conducted on various levels of documents with different stakeholders.*
- *Document approval processes are lengthy and vary significantly depending on the level and group of stakeholders.*
- *The process involves forming working groups, conducting discussions, and generating new initiatives that lead to additional documents and institutionalization.*

Decisions made:

Add levels of disaggregation based on the rule of structured differences. (If aggregated data includes different components with known stable differences, they become axes of aggregation). Aggregation was added by the type of regulatory act and by status.

Refine the status scale and add options. The binary approach (approved and draft) was replaced with a multi-option one (draft, submitted for discussion/involvement of additional parties, returned to a previous stage, approved), with date markers for each stage, enabling calculation of timelines.

After processing the existing data and analyzing it for additional perspectives, certain trends and potential dependencies between document levels, stakeholder groups, status stages, and passage timelines were identified. This information proved highly useful for the project team.

Additionally, a separate indicator was introduced to allow a deeper examination of the discussion phase.

Example 2: *In the case of supply chain operations, a resource-level indicator showed non-trending fluctuations, moving both upward and downward. The team could not explain this using the available data.*

By conducting qualitative interviews with key informants about the process in question, the team discovered that the cost, which had been based on stable processes at the project's inception, was undergoing a cost structure reform: different electricity suppliers were being used, the team realized that adding this layer would enable more sustainable analysis (including identifying the need for multi-factor analysis, which may require either additional resources or defining a limit within the existing analytical approach).

Contextualization can involve working with additional aggregations or proposing alternative metrics. For instance, simple mono-components (e.g., the number of people who received assistance) could be replaced with more complex ones (e.g., the number of unique people who received assistance) or vice versa. These processes can range from simple to complex but must be communicated across all relevant levels and approved by the donor.

Conclusion

This document has presented a framework for improving activity reporting that emphasizes the importance of clearly defined activities, measurable indicators, and a strong connection to project goals. Implementing these guidelines will not only enhance the accuracy and usefulness of project reporting but also promote greater transparency and accountability. By ensuring a clear understanding of project progress and impact, we can improve decision-making, optimize resource allocation, and ultimately contribute to more successful and impactful projects. The adoption of these practices is a crucial step towards achieving more effective and sustainable development outcomes.

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