



CHAPTER 4

CLARITY OF EXPECTED RESULTS: SETTING OBJECTIVES (BUILDING BLOCK 2)

Clarity of Expected Results: Setting Objectives (Building Block 2)

At the functional and operational level, the starting point for results management is the clarity of overall development objectives. In development, results-based objectives must focus on changing human development conditions broadly speaking to those set out in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In particular, when clear outcome objectives are established through a participatory process of building consensus on priorities, they will provide a powerful point of reference for results-based public planning and management.

A. Outcomes

It is generally accepted that outcomes represent the most important benchmark for performance. National development outcome objectives are frequently expressed as part of a national development plan, a poverty reduction strategy, or another overarching policy framework. Ideally, there are clear development outcome objectives throughout a national public service delivery system from the central government to sectors, ministries, and local governments to the frontline service delivery agencies. Rather than perceiving that bureaucratic activity has intrinsic value, the point of having clear development outcome objectives is for managers to stay focused on what ultimately matters: the effects of their actions.

At the same time, it must be recognized that outcome data are often unavailable or costly to obtain, and that even when they are available, the causal relationship between government policy and social conditions may not be easy to determine.

Questions to Pose

- Has an exercise to develop a national vision been undertaken?
- Does an overarching national development plan with clear outcomes (e.g. a national poverty reduction strategy) exist?
- Have national development plans and aspirations been framed in terms of human development outcomes?
- Are donor priorities derived from national planning processes?

B. Indicators and Targets

Indicators are signposts along the path of change and are equally important to outcomes, outputs, and inputs. Indicators are observed in order to verify whether or to what extent progress is being made toward achieving the established goals. By verifying change, indicators help demonstrate progress when things go right and provide early warning signals when things go wrong. This helps to identify changes that need to be made in organizational strategy and practice. Beyond making it possible to demonstrate results, indicators thus have an important role in producing results by providing a reference point for monitoring, decision making, stakeholder consultations, and evaluation.

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Indicators require a baseline, a target, and a timeframe to be useful in verifying the results of a development intervention. In development, it is often difficult to make objective, exact observations of the complex changes addressed, and one therefore frequently has to rely on observations that approximate intended changes, i.e. proxy indicators.

The key consideration in selecting indicators is to find measures that can meaningfully capture key changes, combining what is relevant with what is practically realistic in terms of actually collecting and managing data. (It is commonly acknowledged that indicators should be SMART: **s**pecific, **m**easurable, **a**chievable, **r**ealistic, and **t**ime-bound).

Defining targets rests upon assumptions about resources, organizational capabilities, opportunities for reform, and so on. In the case of both defining indicators and setting targets, however, the major challenges are predominantly managerial rather than technical.



Questions to Pose

- Are development outcome objectives expressed in terms that allow for the objective verification of whether any progress has been made?
- Have realistic targets relative to a baseline been established for interim performance?

C. Outputs, Service Delivery, and Client Satisfaction

Outputs are the direct and concrete products of service delivery. Because outputs represent actual services delivered rather than the activities in their own rights, it is critical that ministries and agencies set clear output objectives and targets. Outputs are generally under managerial control and thus represent a level of change for which managers can be held accountable.

Outputs may comprise physical assets such as kilometers of roads built or number of classrooms constructed but may also be expressed from the client or public service user perspective, i.e., availability of or access to services, standards of quality in service provision, or public satisfaction with service delivery. While few public service users are able to comment on complex technical matters, they are



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qualified to comment on whether public services meet their needs and expectations, whether specific aspects are satisfactory or unsatisfactory, and whether the concerned agencies are responsive, reliable, and accountable.

Questions to Pose

- Are ministries and agencies clear about what outputs they produce as contributions to national development outcomes?
- Do ministries and agencies have specific targets or benchmarks for their outputs like service coverage, standards of quality, and timeliness?

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