

Designing a results framework

A results framework is a planning, communications, and management tool that emphasizes results to clarify and keep track of your key project objectives.

The purpose of a results framework is similar to that of a log-frame or the theory of change. It supports practitioners in planning and understanding the various facets of project implementation and provides a clear illustration. As a tool, the results framework uses a chain of series to display project hypotheses, activities, processes and the intended changes that are expected to occur throughout the project implementation process to achieve its goals and objectives. It leads to the identification and measurement of performance indicators at each stage in this chain and risks that might impede the attainment of the objectives.

The naming of the results framework levels could vary, but most organizations use input and its related activities, output, outcome and impact.

Due to the complexity and project contexts that use the results framework model as a tool, a considerable controversy persists on the distinctions among outputs, outcomes, and impact. A generally useful approach considers outputs as the particular goods or services provided by an intervention (for example, nutrition supplements). In contrast, an outcome can be understood as the benefits of that particular good or service to the target population (such as improved nutrition intake). Impact refers to evidence on whether outcomes are actually changing beneficiary behavior or longer-term conditions of interest at a larger scale (for example, improved eating habits, a healthier population).

Defining interrelated cause-effect linkages for one or more interventions lays the groundwork for designing a results framework. Thus, developing a usable results framework requires clarity concerning the theory of change—the reasons why the project, program, or strategy will likely lead to the outputs; and how those outputs are likely to lead to the immediate or intermediate outcomes. At a larger system scale, the results framework may also describe how those outcomes could be at least hypothetically linked to longer-term sustainable impact. A results framework thus also requires knowledge and estimates how long it will take to achieve each program stage and how much of the outcome is likely to be achieved.

In simple terms, our project ‘input’ includes the initial resources we invest into our project in the form of money, staff, facilities, or equipment that enables our ‘activities.’ Activities that are directly linked to our inputs, on the other hand, are all actions that projects undertake to deliver outputs to achieve the project goals.

Our actions or ‘activities’ will enable changes that result in our ‘outputs.’ Outputs may be understood as products and services delivered by our team due to our activities fueled by our inputs. At the next stage, we expect our outputs to subsequently stimulate changes that result in our ‘outcome.’ Outcomes are understood as modified behaviors, conditions, and situations of individuals, communities, businesses, or organizations that are linked to project outputs. Depending on the nature of the intervention and contextual factors, 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 which never depends on the outcomes of our project alone.

Strategic objective(s) and intermediate outcomes reflect constructs that need further definition to be measured. These outcomes need to be translated into a set of measurable indicators to establish whether progress is being achieved. Indicators are tied to results by focusing on one or more characteristics of the outcome. A measure then expresses an indicator's value quantitatively or qualitatively using SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound) criteria.