MONITORING, EVALUATION, RESULTS & LEARNING (MERL) HANDBOOK FOR ADVOCACY

For Advocates and Implementers of HIV Prevention Research

Edition 1 (2023)

Acknowledgments

This handbook was adapted from the MERL handbook for Advocacy champions and developed based on the experiences and insights of COMPASS Africa partners. COMPASS Africa is an innovative, data-informed, and audacious North-South collaboration of civil society organizations working in the global North, East, and Southern Africa to strengthen the HIV response. More information about COMPASS can be found at **https://avac.org/project/compass/**

The content of this handbook has been put together to align with the specific contexts of Coalition to Accelerate and Support Prevention Research (CASPR) partners. The work of CASPR partners is anchored on accelerating biomedical HIV prevention research, toward the goal of HIV epidemic control.

Special thanks go to AVAC and CASPR Partners for reviewing and supporting the publication of this piece of work. More information about CASPR can be found at **https://avac.org/project/caspr/**

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Introduction to the CASPR MERL Advocacy Handbook

About this Guide

- This guide is not prescriptive. The recommendations in this guide are the foundations of a strong monitoring system, and they are based on the experience of CASPR.
- However, programs are not required or expected to implement every detail of every monitoring strategy exactly as presented here. Flexibility is key.
- The tools and approaches can be used as they are presented here, but they may also be adapted to suit the contexts of specific countries, e.g., by translating them into local languages, or making them conform to the reporting requirements of advocacy work.
- When using this technical handbook, it is important to note that the information provided is subject to change as updates are made.

The objectives of this Handbook are:

To provide the reader with:

- A basic understanding of the purposes, processes, norms, standards and guiding principles for planning, monitoring and evaluation within the advocacy context.
- To enhance the results-based culture and improve the quality of planning, monitoring and evaluation for the purpose of improving programmes and policies, organizational learning and accountability.
- Introduce simplified, streamlined and flexible approaches and tools to monitor progress towards advocacy outcomes.

The Handbook has Multiple and Diverse Audiences:

- CASPR Partners.
- Stakeholders and partners involved in planning, monitoring, and evaluation processes for decision-making in CASPR and beyond.
- Independent evaluators need to understand guiding principles, standards, and processes for evaluation within the advocacy context.
- Members of the national, regional, and global development and evaluation community.

How to Use this Handbook

- Before using the handbook, it is crucial to understand the introductory chapters of the Handbook as it provides an overview of the monitoring and evaluation process, including its benefits, challenges, and key concepts. This section will help users to understand the context in which the handbook is written.
- Depending on their needs and context, users may need to adapt the handbook to suit their specific requirements. For example, they may need to modify data collection methods suggested in the handbook to match their program or intervention.
- Handouts can be used to make MERL exercises more participatory, inclusive and interesting.
- A monitoring and evaluation system is not a one-time activity but rather an ongoing process. Users should continuously review and update their system to ensure that it remains relevant, effective, and efficient.
- All users of this Handbook are encouraged to provide feedback on the publication as well as lessons learned from experience to the CASPR MERL Team, thereby helping to continually improve the monitoring and evaluation framework.

Structure and Content

The Handbook is organized as follows:

Chapter 1 provides an overview of monitoring and evaluation, and describes their critical role in implementing results-focused initiatives.
Chapter 2 focuses on defining key concepts of outcome monitoring and outcome evaluation.
Chapter 3 provides practical guidance on how the Results Chain can be used in the planning, organization and conduct of monitoring and evaluation processes focused on development results (outcomes and outputs).
Chapter 4 discusses the importance of effective reporting and feedback.
Chapter 5 addresses the importance of measuring the effects of our interventions and going beyond just implementing activities.
Chapter 6 looks at documenting the successes of our activities through a participatory evaluation process called the simple participatory assessment of real change (SPARC).
Chapter 7 highlights how good data quality plays a key role in project success.

The Reader of the Handbook will Understand:

- The importance of good program and project design for effective implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.
- The critical role of monitoring in demonstrating the performance of advocacy programs and projects, and in steering the implementation process towards the intended results.
- How monitoring lays the groundwork for evaluation.
- Different evaluation approaches in CASPR and their contributions to learning and accountability.
- The role of monitoring and evaluation in strengthening development effectiveness and managing development results

About the Coalition to Accelerate & Support Prevention Research (CASPR)

The Coalition to Accelerate & Support Prevention Research (CASPR), designed by AVAC in collaboration with key partners and supported by USAID, is a set of partnerships and activities focused on accelerating biomedical HIV prevention research, toward the goal of HIV epidemic control.

- CASPR is comprised of experienced, Africa-based partners that leverage local capacity and ensure activities strengthen and utilize local structures, including Advocacy for Prevention of HIV & AIDS (APHA), Copper Rose Zambia, the HIV/AIDS Vaccine Ethics Group (HAVEG), the New HIV Vaccine & Microbicide Advocacy Society (NHVMAS), Pangaea Zimbabwe AIDS Trust (PZAT), Treatment Advocacy and Literacy Campaign (TALC), WACI Health and Wits Reproductive Health & HIV Institute. WACI Health serves as the secretariat for Africa Free of New HIV Infections (AfNHi) - a regional, Africa-led advocacy network.

- The Coalition supports advocacy networks to strengthen and expand a global cadre of informed, action-oriented advocates; translates research; ensures research preparedness in alignment with the Good Participatory Practice (GPP) Guidelines; and advocates for policies that support efficient and ethical development, introduction and use of new HIV prevention options. CASPR partners also represent organizations and individuals with longstanding engagement and global leadership in the region, including AVAC, FHI 360, the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative (IAVI), and Internews. While core members provide the network with strategic direction and execute the bulk of activities, CASPR engages a range of stakeholders in TB, family planning, and more to reflect the evolution of the epidemic and ensure an integrated and comprehensive response.

Coalition to Accelerate and Support Prevention Research (CASPR)

Dear Advocate,

It is time to take pause, step back and ask some important questions. These questions will lead you to answers that will help you see where you truly stand and enable you to prove that everything you have been doing has been worthwhile!

1. After everything I have done, what changed?
2. What difference has my work made thus far?
3. Of what benefit has my effort been? To whom?
4. What else do I need to do to reach my goal? How? With whom?
5. It clearly has not been working, so what can I start doing differently?
6. Should I really continue doing things in the same way I have been doing them till now?
7. I need help, who can I reach out to? Who can partner with me? Who can strengthen me?
8. How can I convince my community, my colleagues, my government, my country, my partners, and my funders; that what we are doing is worth the time, the energy, the money, and the recognition?

Monitoring, Evaluation, Results, and Learning will help you to answer these questions and to move ahead fearlessly; with direction and hope for triumph in your advocacy, activism and program implementation

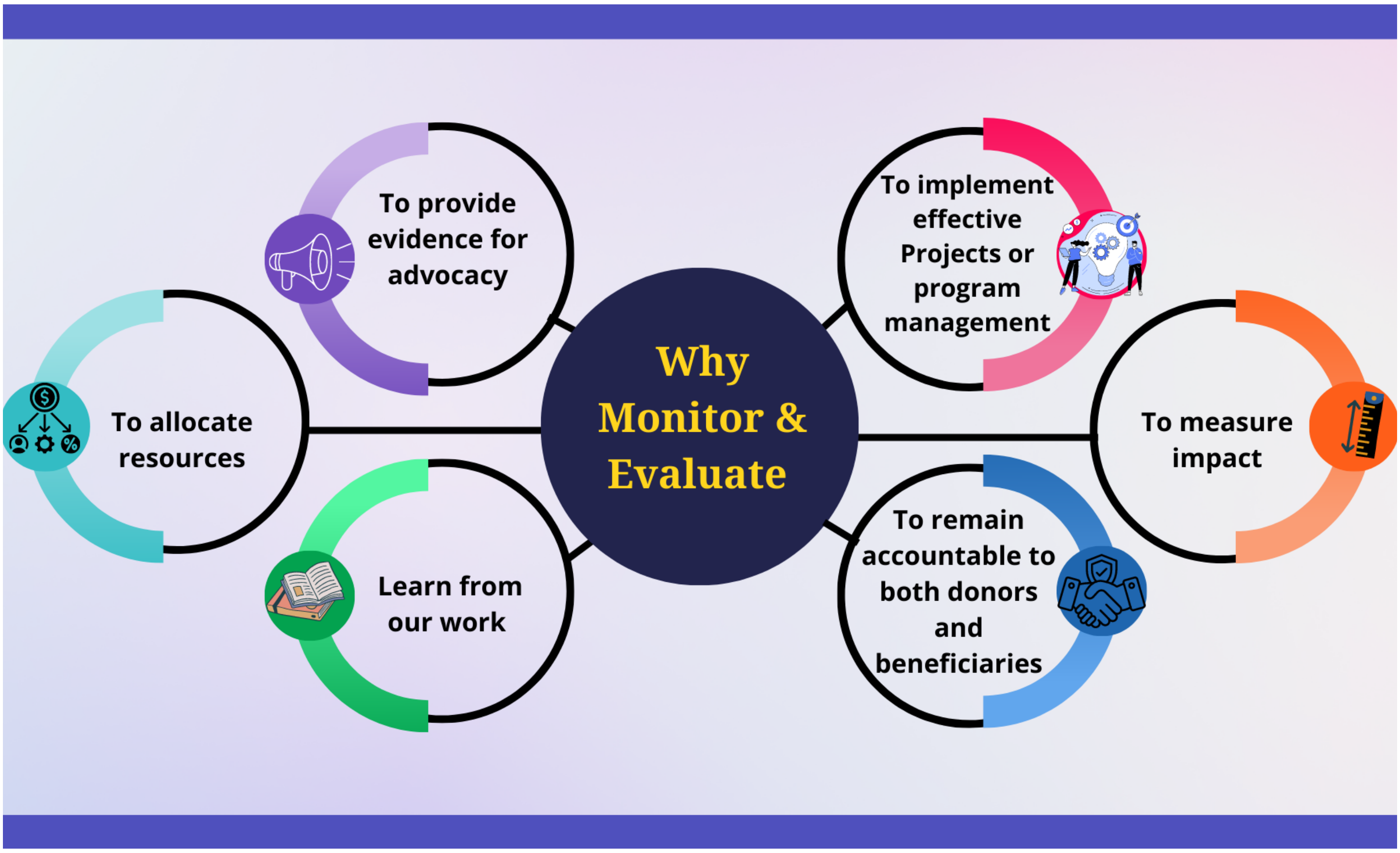
Chapter 1: MERL 101

An overview of MERL

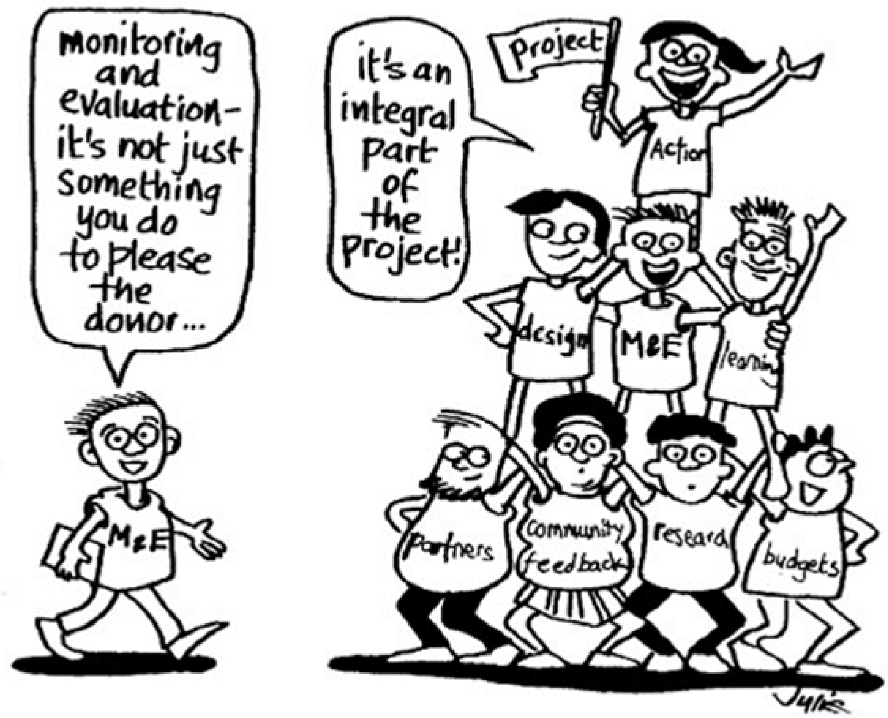
MERL is an acronym that stands for Monitoring, Evaluation, Results, and Learning. It is an approach that we utilize to keep track of our progress, document our experiences, and learn from our results.

MERL is at the core of all advocacy work because it ensures that we have a full view of where we are going, where we are, and where we are coming from. In this way, as advocates, we are empowered to make the right decisions and implement actions that make sense based on the information we gather through MERL.

Six Reasons We Should Monitor and Evaluate Advocacy Efforts.



Who Should be Involved in MERL?



Source: https://www.publichealthnotes.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ME_prove_improve-656x381.png

MERL is for everyone. It is not the responsibility of the MERL officers alone to conduct MERL. Advocates, community members, funding partners, implementers of activities, and beneficiaries of any project must be involved in taking stock of the work. We all have an important part to play to ensure accountability and delivery of tangible, verifiable results.

Our involvement and participation in MERL enables us to prove our effectiveness and improve our approaches for greater impact. As an advocate, MERL is a key that will help you to unlock more for evidenced-based and sustainable advocacy. MERL is definitely for you too!

Monitoring and evaluation is not just something you do to please the donor. It is an integral part of the project!

What is MERL?

Monitoring

Monitoring is the routine process of collecting data. This can be done monthly, quarterly, or annually. The purpose of monitoring is to measure whether the program is doing what it set out to do. This information can be factual information based on quantitative data. It can also be information collected about opinions and views which is called qualitative data.

Monitoring helps you to track your activities in order to answer the following questions:

o What activities are we doing/have we done?
o Where?
o With whom?
o When?
o How many?

Evaluation

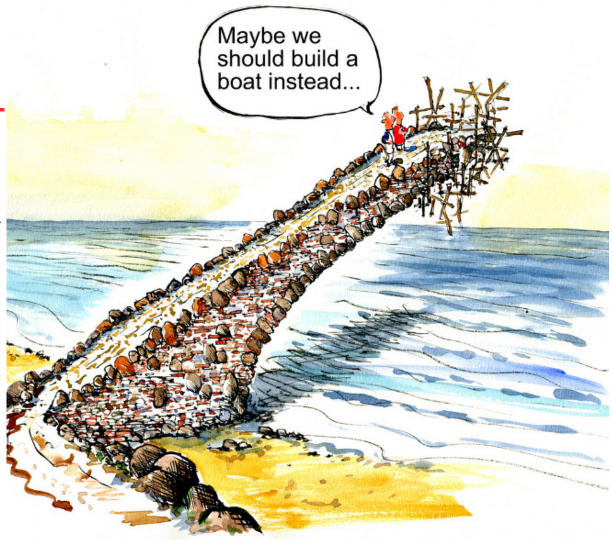
Evaluation is the systematic investigation of whether an intervention or campaign is effective. It helps us understand whether the implemented activities have achieved the desired effect.

Evaluations are carried out periodically, either midway through the project or at the end. Some evaluations are conducted at the beginning of a project. These are called baseline assessments.

A baseline measures the conditions at the start of a project. This information will be used to assess our progress after implementing our activities. A baseline also helps us understand the situation our campaign seeks to change.
When we evaluate our activities, we use the information we have collected during monitoring.

Evaluation helps us to answer the following questions:

1. Are we doing what we said we would do? - to show you are completing the work you agreed to. This is not just about completion but, also includes implementation fidelity i.e. adhering to the work plan.



Source: *https://www.khulisa.com/evaltuesdaytip-use-humor-to-demistify-monitoring-and-evaluation/*

2. Are we doing the right things? - provides information on the relevance to your goals and objectives.

3. What difference are we making? - resources are being utilized effectively in the attainment of sustainable and worthwhile results.

Results

Source: *cartoonstock.com*

Results are the consequences or effects of our activities. They are the reason why we do the things we do.

We implement different activities to achieve the desired result. Our advocacy seeks to produce wins, which are the result of our collaborative efforts.

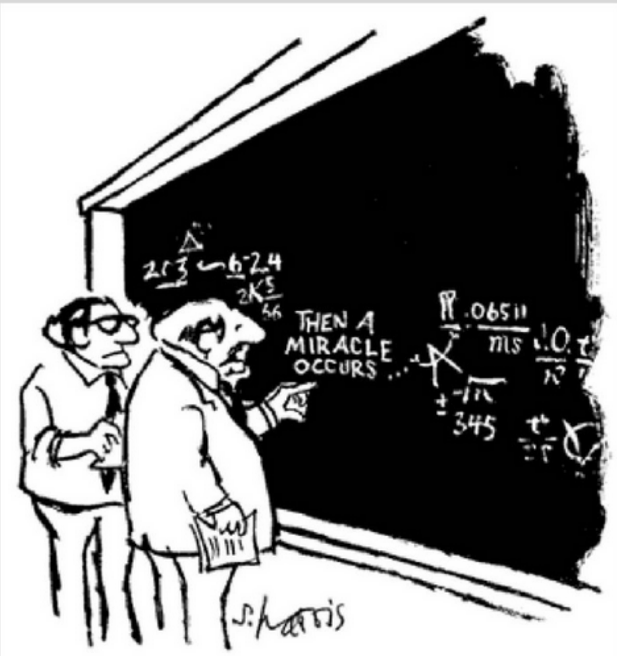
Results are key to the work that we do. Unless we foresee what, we are working towards, we are simply doing the same things repeatedly with no gain or benefit. Essentially, unless we focus on results, our interventions are futile. We are simply making noise or busy looking busy!

Learning

Learning is the process by which we gain new understanding or knowledge based on observations, experiences, or teachings. Learning is a core component of MERL because it helps us to become better in our advocacy and to implement activities that yield worthwhile results.

However, it is not enough to simply implement activities and be stuck on the results. We must learn from both good and bad outcomes; and even from those things that happen unexpectedly. Through learning, we become more efficient advocates; we can improve our strategies, influence behaviors, and deliver quality.

- *Why do we emphasize the **"L" for learning?***
- So that we LEARN from successes and challenges and adapt activities if necessary.
- *If we are successful in something, let's tell others about it. WHY?*
- To demonstrate that our skills and methods are useful!
- *We also need to share our challenges and what we have done to address them. WHY?*
- If we don't, others may struggle with the same challenges.



"I think you should be more explicit here in step two."

Source: https://www.khulisa.com/

Every organization needs to prioritize learning and this can be achieved in the following ways;

- Provide continuous learning opportunities.
- Use learning to reach their goals.
- Link individual performance with organizational performance.
- Foster inquiry and dialogue, making it safe for people to share openly and take risks.
- Embrace creative tension as a source of energy and renewal.
- Are continuously aware of, and interact with, their environment

Challenges of M&E

It is hard to 'do' and 'think' at the same time and our organizations set a higher value on 'doing' rather than 'thinking'.
We often continue to run without slowing down to check if we have made a difference and what that difference is.

Source: *https://slideplayer.com/slide/9918024/*

Advocates often feel too busy to stop, think and reflect on their progress. There may also be strong vested interests and comfort levels in maintaining the status quo.

M&E requires predicting the change we want to see- something impossible to do perfectly, especially in turbulent global environments.

- If you do not measure results, you cannot tell success from failure.
- If you cannot see success, you cannot reward it.
- If you cannot reward success, you are probably rewarding failure.
- If you cannot see success, you cannot learn from it.
- If you cannot recognize failure, you cannot correct it.

Handout: Preparing to Monitor & Evaluate Our Activities.

Three key questions to ask ourselves.

Before you start planning any Monitoring and Evaluation activity it can be helpful to consider three simple questions:

Who are we doing this for?

- Is it for the organization or the team implementing the project or program?
- Is it for the senior bosses of the organization?
- Is it for those who have provided the money – Or is it for those intended to benefit from the project – the beneficiaries?

What is going to be monitored or evaluated?

- In assessing project success, it is the criteria of stakeholders that define what success looks like.
- At one end of the stakeholder spectrum, a government funder may define success in terms of the SDGs.
- On the other end, a rural woman may define success in terms of whether the project had made her life physically easier

How is the monitoring and evaluation activity to be done?

- What resources are available: time, money, and people?
- It is only when we can answer these three questions that we can start to think about the design of a monitoring and evaluation process.

Key Points to Remember

- Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is a crucial step in determining how well programs, projects, and policies are working.
- Understanding the key MERL concepts and definitions is crucial for developing effective M&E plans and implementing successful programs.
- In summary, monitoring and evaluation are essential tools for ensuring that projects and programs achieve their intended results.
- By focusing on results-based management, using indicators to track progress, collecting and analyzing data, making evidence-based decisions, promoting learning, and ensuring accountability, organizations can improve the effectiveness and sustainability of their projects and programs.

Chapter 2: Important MERL Terms You Need to Know

Defining Key MERL Terms

Goal

A general statement that describes the hoped-for result of a campaign, or advocacy activity, in the long term. The project goals specify what
will be accomplished over the entire project period and should directly relate to the problem statement, and vision. The goal is achieved through the project objectives and activities.

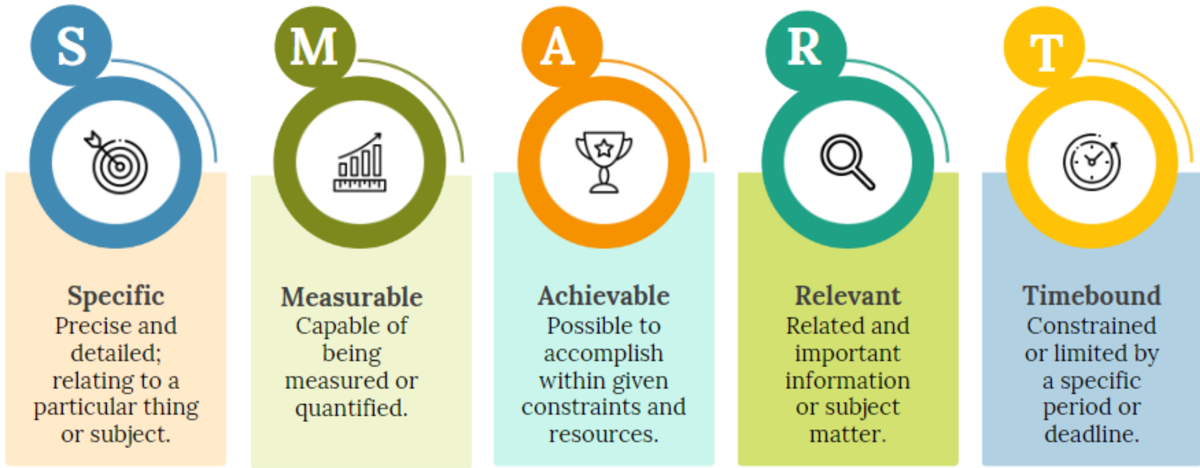
Objective

An objective is a precise action or measurable step that an individual or group takes to move closer to the goal. It is a specific, operationalized statement detailing the desired accomplishment of an intervention.
A properly stated objective is action-oriented, starts with the word "to," and is followed by an action verb. Objectives address questions of "what" and "when," but not "why" or "how."
Completion of objectives results in specific, measurable outcomes that directly contribute to the achievement of the project goals.

In a five-year HIV Prevention Research Advocacy Project, examples of objectives can include:

- Enhance advocacy capacity and impact at the global, national, sub-national, and community levels.
- Increase informed and accurate reporting in the media of prevention research, including mainstream, traditional forms of media, online platforms, an innovative social media strategy, and through sustained engagement with key journalists.
- Enhance GPP, including community and stakeholder engagement, gender balance, equality, and female empowerment
- Facilitate and support policy formulation and policy change that fosters biomedical HIV prevention research at global, regional, national and subnational levels.

SMART Objectives



When you set objectives for your activities, always consider, or keep in mind that they must be **SMART**. This acronym is unpacked below.

(S)pecific: The objective is clearly stated, so anyone reading it can understand, what will be done and who will do it. The more specific you can be about what action you want to do to achieve your goal and by when, the better.
Instead of, "We'll hold a meeting," your objective should be: "To hold a meeting for parents of teenage children in Arusha community Hall to invite input on the Drug and Harmful Substance Abuse initiative."

(M)easurable. Put your objective in measurable terms. Measuring your objectives helps you determine if you are making progress. It keeps you on track and on schedule
Instead of saying: "Smoking in our community will be reduced," consider framing it this way instead: "The percentage of smokers in our community will decline by 30% by the year 2026."

(A)chievable. It's great for you to be ambitious, but you should also remember to set realistic objectives that you know you can actually achieve. Setting reasonable objectives helps set the project up for success. Note that real change takes time and resources. If you bite off more than you can chew, the community you want to influence may become prematurely disappointed or discouraged if they do not see change.

(R)elevant (to your goal). A relevant objective makes sense, that is, it fits the purpose of the grant, it fits the culture and structure of the community, and it addresses the vision of the project

(T)imed. A date for completion should be set. Even if circumstances change and your date must be altered later, it's much better to start off knowing when you can expect to achieve your objectives, so you will know when it may become necessary to adjust.

Handout: SMART Objectives

Tips for writing SMART Objectives

Specific	• Define what you expect • Determine who will do it • Detail accountability • Use action verbs, expressing physical or mental action, as much as possible • Provide enough detail - this depends on the objective but should be enough to be clear
Measurable	• Identify how you will know objective was accomplished – usually this means quantity but can also be quality (for instance, "80% of participants agree or strongly agree on the feedback form")
Attainable	• Make sure you have the time, manpower, resources, and authority to accomplish the objective • Consider if there may be factors beyond your control
Relevant	• The objective helps you meet the purpose of the grant • The objective is aligned with the Community Readiness Assessment scores
Time bound	• Specify when the objective should be completed • Include time-lined benchmarks for long-range goals and all objectives

Extracted from https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/nc-smart-goals-fact-sheet.pdf

Sample Objective 2: *Continue to educate our community that suicide is a public health problem.*

Sample detailed SMART Objective 2: *"The project team will hold two 5K walk/runs with at least four entities by July 1, 2017 and speak once a month at 9 community meetings from January-September 2017, to educate our community that suicide is a preventable public health problem,"*

Figure 2. SMART Objectives #2

Specific

- Who: Project Team
- What: Walk/runs & presentations

Measurable

- How many? 2 wakl/runs; 9 presentations
- Documented by: Sign-in sheets & agendas
- Accountable to: Board

Attainable

- Justification: We have time to paln and staff to implement.

Relevant

- Rationale: This type of awareness raising is consisten with our CRA score

Time-Based

- When: 2 events & 9 presentations by September 2017

Extracted from https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/nc-smart-goals-fact-sheet.pdf

Target

A program target is a quantified goal or objective that a program plans to achieve by a certain date. Once a program is underway, targets serve as the guideposts for monitoring whether progress is being made on schedule and at the levels originally envisioned.

For example, UNAIDS 2025 targets state that, by 2025:

- 95% of people with HIV will know their status
- 95% of people with HIV who know their status will be on treatment
- 95% of people with HIV on treatment will be virally suppressed.

Indicator

Is a specific, observable, and measurable characteristic that can be used to show changes or progress a campaign is making toward achieving a specific outcome. An indicator should always be aligned with an output, outcome or impact statement that defines what sort of change is being sought. Indicators should not simply appear in isolation.

An example of an indicator would be the percentage of young people participating in HIV prevention programs.

Why do we need indicators?

There are a number of reasons why it is important to use indicators:

1. To determine progress toward achieving planned results.
2. To inform decision-making for more effective annual work plans of projects.
3. To improve a project's performance and development impact.
4. To support sound resource allocation and decisions.
5. To mitigate the risk to the achievement of results

Indicators can tell us things such as:

- To what extent our program objectives have been met
- What progress our project or program has made
- The extent to which our targets have been met
- That a change we are interested in is happening

However, indicators only provide an indication that something has happened – they are not proof and they cannot tell us:

- Why our program or project has made a difference
- Why and how change occurs
- How our communication activities should be undertaken

Types of Indicators

(i) Quantitative Indicators

Quantitative indicators statistically measure the amount or value of inputs or resources available. Quantitative indicators have a numerical value and are measures of quantity such as –the number of men and women in decision-making positions; or the level of income per year by sex as compared to baseline level.

Example:

- Number of young people capable of articulating a Research Protocol;
- % of average conference attendance by gender, age, and income.
- Number of women accessing oral PrEP at a local health facility.

(ii) Qualitative Indicators

Reflects people's judgment, opinions, perceptions, and attitudes of a given situation or subject. They measure performance relative to given standards and norms. They are intended to measure the "quality" of the input, process, and output of the program.

Example:

- The sense of well-being;
- The application of information or knowledge;
- The degree of openness;
- The quality of participation;
- The nature of dialogue;
- The level of awareness.

Tip:
It is not the way the indicator is worded that makes it qualitative or quantitative but the way it is reported – if you report a number, it is quantitative if you report in words it is qualitative.

Key Points to Remember

- Goals should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) to ensure they are attainable and meaningful.
- SMART Objectives serve as a roadmap for the project team, providing a clear understanding of what needs to be accomplished.
- Indicators provide a means of assessing whether the project is on track and can help identify areas where corrective action may be needed. Indicators should be chosen carefully to ensure they accurately reflect progress towards achieving objectives.
- Together, goals, objectives, and indicators provide a framework for effective project management.
- They help ensure that everyone involved in the project understands what needs to be achieved and how progress will be measured.
- This clarity of purpose can help keep the project team focused and motivated, increasing the likelihood of success.

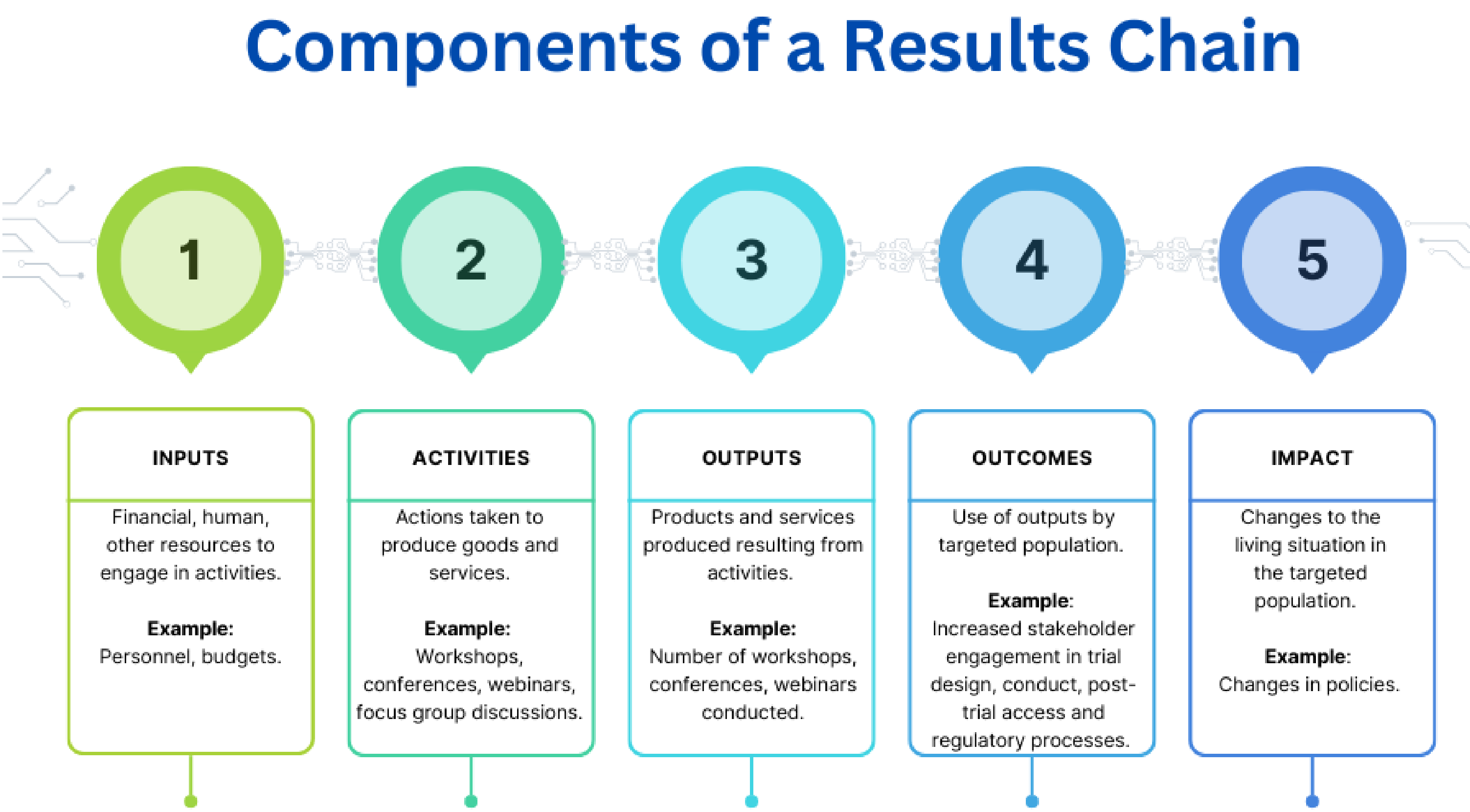
Chapter 3: Planning for Impact using the Results Chain

The Results Chain

What is it?

A Results Chain shows how the activities you are implementing will lead to your desired result. It is a visual tool that shows how activities are linked to outputs, how outputs lead to outcomes, and eventually how these components all contribute to long-term and lasting results which are usually referred to as impact.

Understanding the Results Chain helps us to identify our wins, amplify our strengths, tell our stories, learn from challenges, and take stock of our successes. It is important to start moving beyond activities and focus on the change we are bringing.



Inputs

The financial, human, and material resources used for the development intervention. Inputs ensure that it is possible to deliver the intended results of a project.

Some examples of inputs are:

Funds, commodities, equipment, technologies, personnel, and facilities.

Outputs

The products, capital goods, and services that result from a development intervention; may also include changes resulting from the intervention that are relevant to achieving outcomes.

Some examples of outputs are:

- The number of workshops, webinars, and trainings held to train or support advocates.
- The number of media cafes held.
- The number of research-related stakeholder consultations convened.
- The number of consultative meetings, working groups, and forums on global and national policy development and guideline review.

Outcomes

Outcomes are the events, occurrences, or changes in conditions, behavior, or attitudes that indicate progress toward a project's goals. Outcomes are specific, measurable, and meaningful.

The value of any project cannot be measured without defining success.

In order to develop outcomes, program personnel should ask what results are expected from each output.

Some examples of outcomes are:

- Effectiveness of capacity strengthening on the advocacy field
- Strengthened communication channels for dissemination of HIV prevention research to key audiences
- Effectiveness of regulatory capacity strengthening on the advocacy field
- GPP utilized as a foundational practice among research institutions and industry.

Impact

Long-term effects produced by a development intervention can be described as positive or negative; primary or secondary; direct or indirect; and intended or unintended. For this reason, there is a need to plan for impact, recognizing that the project will likely achieve outcomes.

How the Results Chain helps in Managing Advocacy Efforts.

Planning
A results chain helps project managers to plan their projects by providing a clear understanding of the inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impact of the project. This understanding helps project managers to identify the resources required for the project, the timeline for implementation, and the expected outcomes.

Implementation
During project implementation, a results chain helps project managers to monitor progress and ensure that activities are being carried out as planned. It also helps project managers to identify any challenges that may arise during implementation and make necessary adjustments.

Evaluation
After the completion of a project, a results chain helps project managers to evaluate the success of the project by comparing actual outcomes with expected outcomes. This evaluation provides valuable insights into what worked well and what did not work well during the project. These insights can be used to improve future projects.

Distinguishing Between Impact, Outcomes, and Outputs

The following table shows the differences between impact, outcomes, and outputs in terms of what is measured by each and what the indicator for achievement is.

Point of measurement	What is measured	Indicators
Outputs	Effort	Implementation of activities
Outcomes	Effectiveness	Use of outputs and sustained production of benefits
Impact	Change	Difference from the original problem situation

Jerry Adams 2011 adapted from Fowler 1997

Handout: Differences between Outputs & Outcomes

Outputs	Outcomes
Outputs are achieved immediately after implementing an activity or a program. It takes less time to accomplish.	The outcome is the level of performance or achievement that occurred because of the activity or programs. It takes more time to accomplish.
Output is linked to activities. The output indicates the completion of a project/program's activities.	The outcome is linked to the objective. The outcome indicates the achievement of a project/program.
Outputs are the means to an end. These are actions/items that contribute to achieving an outcome.	Outcomes are the end results. Outcomes are what a project desires to achieve.
Outputs do not show the level of performance/achievement.	The outcome shows the level of achievement due to the activity/services provided.
Outputs are not the measure of effectiveness.	Effectiveness, efficacy, and efficiency are used to measure outcomes.
Outputs can be CONTROLLED by the program.	Outcomes can only be INFLUENCED by the program.

Tip:

Not what we are busy doing, but what we are busy ACHIEVING!

Key Points to Remember

- The results chain is a visual tool to show what the programme is doing, and why. They clarify the 'logic' of the programme, by showing how activities will lead to outputs, outcomes, and eventually development impact.
- The importance of a results chain lies in its ability to help project managers plan, implement, and evaluate their projects effectively.
- In summary, a results chain is an essential tool in project management as it helps project managers to plan, implement, and evaluate their projects effectively.

Chapter 4: The Essential Role of Reporting in Project Management.

Planning for Reporting and Feedback

***Title**: The Seven Secrets of Good Monitoring and Evaluation. Source: https://youtu.be/7mKiESZnmxg?t=1*

Understanding Reporting in Project Management

Reporting plays a crucial role in project management as it provides valuable information and insights that enable effective decision-making, monitoring, and control throughout the project lifecycle.

It serves as a means of communication between project managers, team members, and stakeholders. It provides a platform for sharing information, updates, and progress reports on the project's objectives, milestones, deliverables, risks, issues, and challenges.

Effective reporting ensures that all stakeholders are well-informed about the project's status, enabling them to make informed decisions and take appropriate actions. Regular reporting also fosters stakeholder engagement by keeping them involved and invested in the project's success.

Reports

There are many ways of reporting and disseminating information to various stakeholders.

Reports range from simple reports that outline what activities have been completed in any given project, to more complex analytical reports that can provide information that satisfies donors' needs in large programs.

Knowing what to include in a report is determined by the target stakeholders. These stakeholders can include fellow partners, communities, community leadership, and funders. that means reports require tailoring as each stakeholder has their own criteria and expectations when evaluating the quality of a report.

Whatever purpose the report has been prepared for, it is a systematic, well-organized document that defines and analyses a series of activities, outputs, or outcomes, and should include:

- The record of a completed activity or series of activities or outcomes
- Interpretation of the significance of the activity or event.
- Evaluation of the facts or results of information presented.
- Discussion of the outcomes of a decision or course of action.
- Conclusions.
- Recommendations.

The box below provides some of the areas that should be considered when reporting on a change or changes:

- Has there been a change?
- How significant was the change?
- What made the change happen?
- Which target groups were affected by the change?
- What was the impact on sub-categories or groups?
- Was the change intended or not?
- How will people's lives be impacted, either positively or negatively?"
- How do changes compare to the baseline (if any)?
- What evidence do you have for your change?
- How did you contribute towards the change?
- Is it likely to be sustainable?

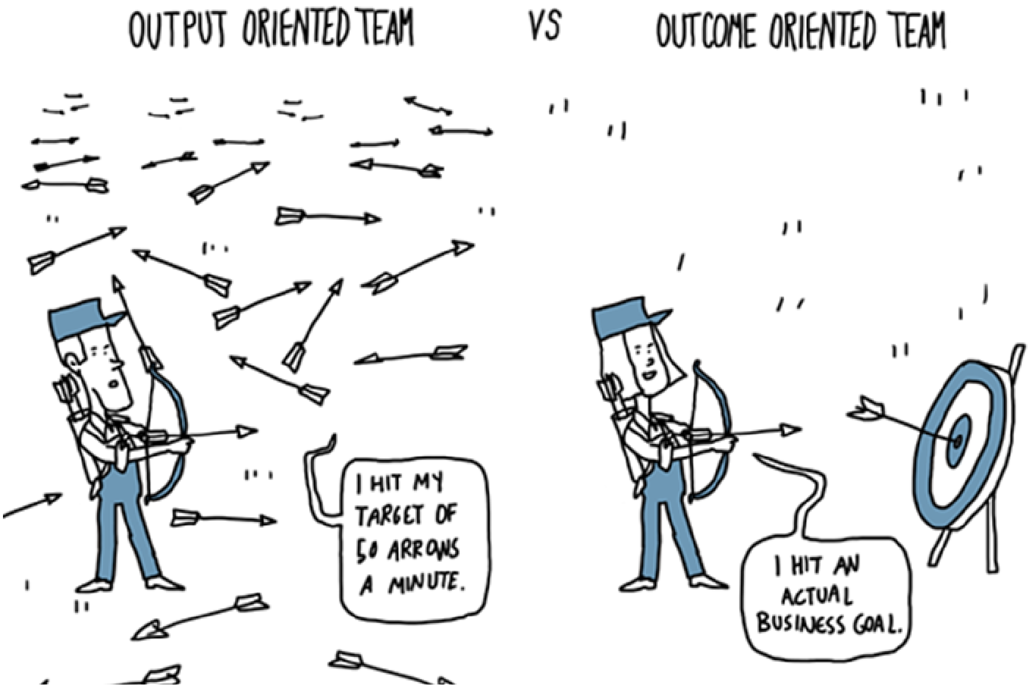
The Benefits of Effective Reporting: Why It's a Good Investment

Key Points to Remember

- Effective reporting is an essential aspect of project management that ensures the successful completion of projects.
- Reporting provides a means of communicating project status, progress, and issues to stakeholders, including team members, clients, and management.
- Good reporting provides a way to communicate progress, identify risks and opportunities, promote collaboration, and enable effective decision-making.
- In conclusion, effective reporting is critical in project management as it enables project managers to track progress, identify issues, and communicate with stakeholders.

Chapter 5: Moving from Activities to Results

Taking Stock of our Results



Source: *businessillustrator.com*

Too often as advocates, we get caught up in implementing our day-to-day activities. Our passion overtakes us, and we continually do the same things over and over again. We get busy with meetings, and workshops, developing and disseminating advocacy materials with our messages, participating in protests, and many other things that consume our time and energy.

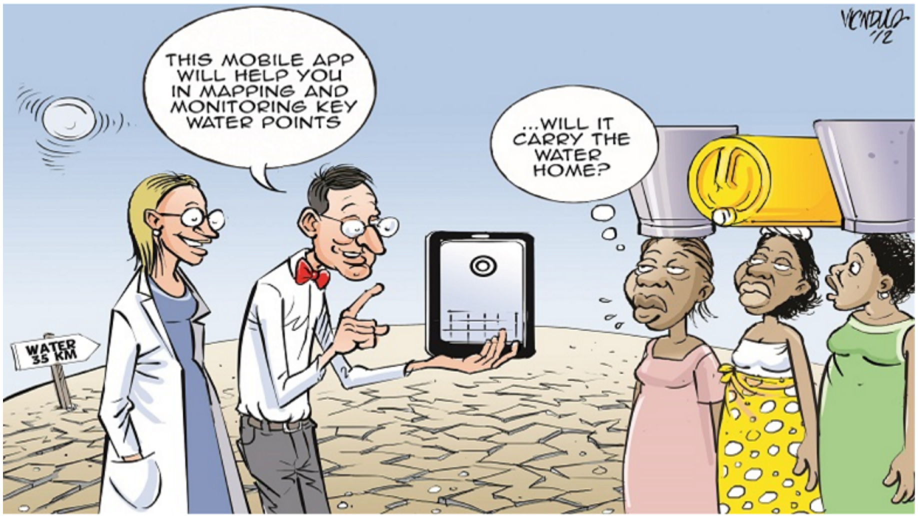
This is all good, except that it is of no use unless we can see and yield the benefits of all our hard work. All these efforts will only make sense if there are results to show for it! But unfortunately, we get so busy implementing that we lose track of what we are actually achieving.

Results are a core component of MERL because they are evidence of the value of the things, we do every day in our advocacy work.
It is critical for us to begin to move beyond activities, and to begin taking stock of our results

As you jump into this next chapter, keep in mind the key lessons from the previous sections; that indicators may be used to measure the outputs or outcomes, and that our results will tell us if we have addressed the problem and achieved the goals/ objectives.

Increasing the Visibility of our Results

As advocates, we must aim to influence change, cause shifts and address barriers to achieving our goals. Focusing on outcomes is key! Below are some important questions to ask, that will help you to see and understand the results of your activities.



Source: https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2019/12/12/2020-vision—-new-year-new-cartoon-calendar

The questions you should ask are:

1. Do our actions lead to desired change? **What difference** has our meeting/ workshop/ position paper/Twitter storm made?
2. Are we doing those things that will enable us to achieve what we have set out to do?
3. Are we making any difference through the activities we are implementing? We did this –**SO WHAT** has changed?

Keeping track of your advocacy results starts with having clear objectives that should be linked to policy change and existing evidence.

Methods of Collecting and Measuring Results

There are so many ways of tracking results, and we use these methods so many times without thinking about it. How you collect and measure results depends on what you plan to use them for, as well as how practical and appropriate the approach is within your context.

As outlined in the previous sections, results can be tracked at any point in the project; right from the implementation of activities right up to the point where there are changes that have occurred due to the project.

Pop quiz: Activities, Outputs or Outcomes?

INSTRUCTIONS:

Answer the questions on the poll; let's see how well you understand what an activity, output, and outcome is!!

Determine if each statement represents an *Activity, Output, Or Outcome* by circling the best answer from the options provided. Check for the correct response from the answers provided at the bottom of this page

QUESTIONS:	ANSWER ACTIVITY (A)	OUTPUT (B)	OUTCOME (C)
1. Lobbying with the Ministry of Health advisors and other officials on the need to quicken the approval process for Dapivirine ring research in Tanzania.	●	●	●
2. 12 organizations attending one-on-one support sessions on report writing.	●	●	●
3. Increase in knowledge about new HIV biomedical options among adolescent girls and young women in tertiary institutions.	●	●	●
4. One virtual virus vaccine-related research library was launched to provide accessible science to communities, media, policymakers, and staff working in clinical trial settings.	●	●	●
5. Increased breadth of partners supporting the approval of funding towards the Ring.	●	●	●
6. Increased media coverage (e.g., quantity, prioritization, the extent of coverage, variety of media) on the importance of HIV Vaccines.	●	●	●
7. TV Programs on the impact made by a group of mentors in Burkina Faso.	●	●	●
8. Increased awareness of COVID-19 and public messaging among selected groups (e.g., policymakers, the general public, opinion leaders, religious leaders)	●	●	●
9. Conducting training for community representatives on stakeholder engagement processes.	●	●	●
10. 25 participants enrolled in the 2022 GPP Leadership Course.	●	●	●

Answers

1.A 2. A 3. C 4. B 5.C 6.C 7.B 8.C 9. A 10. B

Note:

A well-thought-out monitoring, evaluation, and learning system is able to give:

- Numbers that tell a story e.g., uptake of services such as HIV testing, PrEP, Contraceptives, etc.
- Experiences that strengthen the story e.g., drug stock-outs, health worker attitudes, client satisfaction
- Photographs that convey the message
- Evidence that makes your advocacy case legitimate e.g., pulling together verifiable information into a position paper or policy brief.

Accountability in Assessing the Effectiveness of Advocacy Efforts

Accountability is crucial to ensure transparency, credibility, and the ability to learn from past experiences. It involves holding individuals, organizations, or institutions responsible for their actions, decisions, and outcomes. It is generally not an easy task to assess the effectiveness of advocacy.

When results cannot be quantified or physically counted, we may feel like we have not made a difference, and yet our advocacy is actually yielding valuable outcomes. Therefore, achieving accountability in advocacy efforts requires a systematic approach that includes clear goals, measurable indicators, reliable data collection methods, and mechanisms for evaluation and feedback.

Accountability can be achieved when assessing the effectiveness of advocacy efforts.
It is key; do what you said you would do! Be responsible for the outcomes of your actions. There is also the issue of contribution versus attribution which advocates must consider when assessing their progress. We must give credit where it is due. Be honest about what you have achieved and be clear about the extent of your influence.

It is important for advocates to understand how MERL relates to the advocacy work we are doing. MERL is not just about demonstrating and showcasing positive results; it also involves taking stock of our losses and addressing challenges or barriers to the achievement of our objectives.

By implementing these elements, advocates can ensure that they are accountable for their actions and outcomes while continuously improving their advocacy strategies

Learning & Reflection Questions

In your group, network or organization, use the following guiding questions to check how you can strengthen the quality of your results.

Question 1. What results have we achieved from the activities we have implemented in the past 6 months?

Question 2. Where should we focus our efforts/ resources?

Question 3. How can we be more intentional about claiming our results?

Question 4. We have action items, but what is our plan for documenting/ showing results?

Celebrating Successes and Learning from Challenges

Telling the story of our advocacy activities helps us to reflect on the lessons we have learned and gives us an opportunity to share our progress with the world.

Sometimes, this is not easy because so many things are happening at the same time, and we may struggle to decide on our most valued achievement.

Key Points to Remember

- Moving beyond activities is a strategy that focuses on achieving defined results, rather than just completing activities.
- It is an approach that emphasizes the importance of measuring and evaluating progress towards achieving objectives, and using this information to improve decision-making and resource allocation.
- By setting clear objectives and measuring progress towards them, institutions and organizations can demonstrate their impact and effectiveness to stakeholders.
- By focusing on results rather than activities, organizations can prioritize their efforts based on what will have the greatest impact. This can help to ensure that resources are being used in the most effective way possible.
- This can help to build trust and support among stakeholders, which is essential for long-term success.

6. Documenting our Successes using the Simple Participatory Assessment of Real Change (SPARC) Approach

Simple Participatory Assessment of Real Change (SPARC)

In this chapter, we introduce you to another tool that you can utilize to prioritize your wins and write compelling stories about the changes that have come about as a result of your advocacy. This approach is called Simple Participatory Assessment of Real Change (SPARC).

Why tell stories?

- People enjoy telling and listening to stories; it is a part of our way of life.
- Stories are memorable; people remember stories.
- Stories can be used to convey difficult messages or matters that are not usually discussed.
- Stories paint the picture of complex situations or contexts

What happens if we let others tell our story?

What is SPARC?

SPARC is a participatory approach to documenting and learning from evidence-based stories of change. It is a response to a need to capture the richness and range of changes in complex advocacy environments.

It is a participatory evaluation approach, which draws from efforts perfected over the years by evaluators and practitioners who were trying to understand and document changes in environments that are constantly changing and diverse. SPARC has been designed to draw on the principles and steps of an evaluation approach called Outcome Harvesting, but modified to reflect the realities and needs of people implementing advocacy projects such as yourself.

SPARC is aimed at helping partners collectively identify what has changed in the field or among stakeholders and if we have individually or collectively contributed to those changes. In other words, SPARC helps us tell the story of our most significant outcomes.

When should we use SPARC?

Now that we have looked at external factors that favor the use of SPARC let us examine some internal reasons that call for the use of SPARC within our organizational setup.

- SPARC answers the so-what question about our activities. For example, we have conducted a training on Stakeholder Engagement (SE), what has changed? The change could be in behaviors, relationships, skills, and strategies that SE work is aimed at influencing. By asking ourselves, the so-what question, we move beyond just conducting activities to being deliberate about results. Even the unintended ones can provide useful lessons that can improve future programming.
- Promotes dialogue and critical reflection among diverse coalition partners.

- Veers away from check-the-box M&E to better examine outcomes related to the understanding, practices, relationships, and policies of various stakeholders.

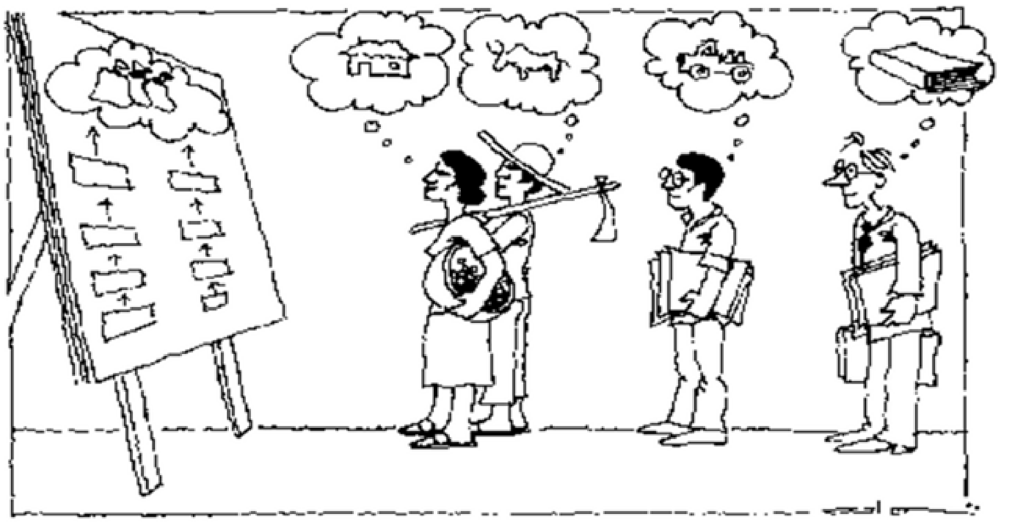
- SPARC bridges silos that might naturally emerge as a result of working in different environments and tactics. Working as a group enables participants to ask questions and challenge each other about what happened and the significance of the identified outcomes.

What do we mean by outcomes again?

What a social actor did, or is doing, that reflects a significant change in their behavior, relationships, activities, actions, policies, or practice, which in turn may have implications for your campaign goals and objectives

An outcome might describe an action that reflects a demonstrated change in awareness, commitment, engagement, and collaborative action. They might also be changes in policy, funding, or implementation of programs.

The Emphasis on Contribution versus Attribution



Source: *https://participationdictionary.wordpress.com/2014/04/25/p-for-participatory-monitoring-and-evaluation-pme/*

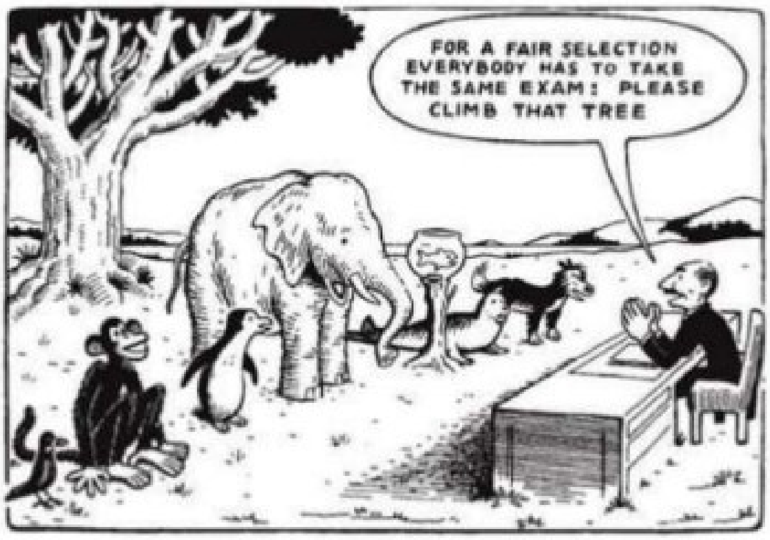
There are two primary reasons why organizations must accurately measure and explain the extent to which they have influenced change. The first step is to demonstrate accountability for outcomes. This entails determining how far a change or set of changes came from an organization`s efforts in order to determine the impact.

The second reason is to learn so that you can improve. In this scenario, it is critical to analyze not only if or how far a CSO has driven change, but also how and why. Understanding the role of other agencies and/or causes in effecting change is frequently required.

Overcoming Traditional M&E Challenges with the SPARC Approach

Projects are implemented within a wider social, economic, and political environment that has a strong bearing on the course of an intervention. As such, this means project implementation and achievement of results can be uncertain regardless of our clearly laid-out plans. Think about how COVID-19 affected our social system. Imagine how a new policy governing the inclusion of minors in HIV research and trials - can have a bearing on how we intend to implement or achieve our set goals.

Contribution is much more difficult to quantify within complicated programs dealing with topics such as advocacy. There are generally several agencies engaged, and interventions are often carried out over years, if not decades. It may be possible to demonstrate contribution to short-term changes directly related to the activity of an organization. However, calculating the overall contribution to long-term change may be extremely difficult, if not impossible.



Source:https://cgspace.cgiar.org

An organization, for example, may be able to demonstrate that its awareness-raising campaign increased understanding of the needs of persons living with HIV/AIDS. However, it may be impossible to accurately quantify the effect of that awareness-raising initiative on a general shift in rhetoric among local officials.

If a CSO fails to accomplish this correctly, inaccurate findings may lead to improper judgments. This means CSOs need to be realistic about what they can reasonably claim.

Contribution means that an intervention or agency was one amongst a number of influences that helped produce a change or set of changes.

Other influences could include:
• the actions of other individuals or agencies not engaged in the intervention;
• previous initiatives that helped lay the groundwork for success or failure; or
• external factors, such as changes in the wider physical, socio-economic or political environment

SPARC then recognizes that no one actor can achieve a full win without the support or input of other stakeholders in the advocacy field. SPARC allows us to assess our results while acknowledging the effects of this external environment. It collects evidence of what has changed in the environment or among stakeholders; and helps you to determine whether your intervention has contributed to those changes and how.

SPARC vs Traditional M&E

For traditional M&E we start by wanting to know what we did or activities that we implemented then check what changed as a result of that activity.

The end question would be, "Are we doing what we set out to achieve?"

	Starting Point	Ending Point	Focus of Evidence
Traditional M&E	What we did	What changed as a result of our actions	Proving we were effective
SPARC	What our target actors did or how their position, convictions changed	How we may have influenced that change	Supporting that the observed change happened

Can you tell the difference now?

SPARC (CONTRIBUTION)	TRADITIONAL M&E (ATTRIBUTION)
Women`s perspectives are now being prioritized and included in the Medical Research Council's decisions and research agendas. As organization ABC, we trained 30 women on Stakeholder Engagement. Previously stakeholder engagement training had not been including women as participants.	Organization ABC conducted training on Stakeholder Engagement with 30 women, thereby increasing the knowledge of women on research ethics and this led to the inclusion of women in the national research stakeholder consultation processes led by the Medical Research Council.

In short traditional M&E is about proving that we caused the change (attribution) whilst SPARC looks at the role we played in the result that was achieved(contribution). Traditional M&E is focused on activities whilst SPARC is about results.

Key Points to Remember

- Traditional M&E relies heavily on quantitative data such as surveys, indicators, and statistics to measure progress and impact. In contrast, the SPARC approach places greater emphasis on qualitative data such as case studies, interviews, focus groups, and storytelling to capture the complex dynamics of advocacy initiatives. Qualitative data can provide rich insights into how advocacy efforts are influencing attitudes, behaviors, norms, and values among different stakeholders.

- In M&E, attribution and contribution are important concepts because they allow us to determine whether an intervention or program is having the intended impact. By understanding what aspects of an intervention are contributing to its success (or lack thereof), we can make informed decisions about how to improve it.

- Overall, while traditional and advocacy M&E share some common principles and methods, they differ in their focus, scope, approach, and data sources. Understanding these differences is critical for designing and implementing effective M&E systems that meet the specific needs and goals of different programs and initiatives.

So how exactly do you conduct a SPARC process?

The first thing you must keep in mind is that SPARC is not an individual process but must involve all partners and stakeholders who have participated in or contributed to the implementation of your project. It is a group exercise that requires the full participation of everyone who is involved. The sections below summarize and describe the steps involved in SPARC.

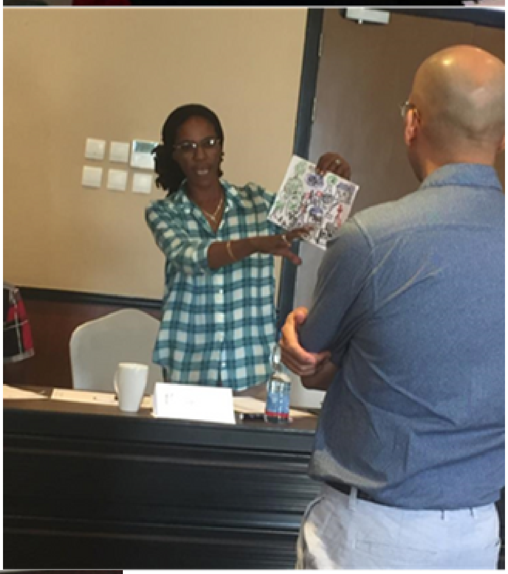
Step 1: It starts with a picture.

On a piece of paper, each member of the group must draw a picture that shows what they have achieved from the project.
The following question can be used to guide group members as they draw their pictures;

What do you think have been the most significant signs of progress related to your organization's/ coalition's goals and objectives in the last year?

This is an individual exercise and participants are free to be as creative as possible in their art pieces.

Once everyone has completed drawing their picture, participants can take turns describing to the group what they have drawn.



Step 2: Create a Story Collage.

In your group, create a collage of all your drawings. Take time to reflect and discuss the following questions:

- o What is the big picture that your collage is showing?
- o If you were to describe the big picture in a sentence or two, what would it be?
- o Are there other views or interpretations?

Step 3: Deepening of Outcomes

As a group, write at least three separate outcome statements on a sheet of paper. They may be positive, negative, expected, unexpected. Your outcome statements must respond to the question; what happened?

In other words, your statement must provide a basic description of the outcome e.g., change in the behavior, relationships, activities, actions, policies or practice of the target actors, including where and when it happened.
The objective of this step is to develop a full list of potential positive and negative outcomes. In this step, participants “download” their lists of outcomes. It is more like a brainstorming session, rather than a process to scrutinize outcomes.

Step 4: Tell Your Outcome Stories.

Once the group has clearly listed their outcome statement, it is time to write SPARC stories for each of the outcomes. Use the questions below to guide you as you develop your stories. Each story should not exceed 1 page in length.

What Happened?

- What changed? who was involved?
- Where and when did this happen?

Highlight why this change is worth noting!

- Did it push you closer to your goal?
- How did this change affect your environment, policy, service delivery or behaviors, etc.?

What was your organization's/Coalition's contribution to this outcome?

- "This couldn't have happened without us" or "We helped but others were the key actors" or "We had nothing to do with it"

What is your evidence to support your outcome story?

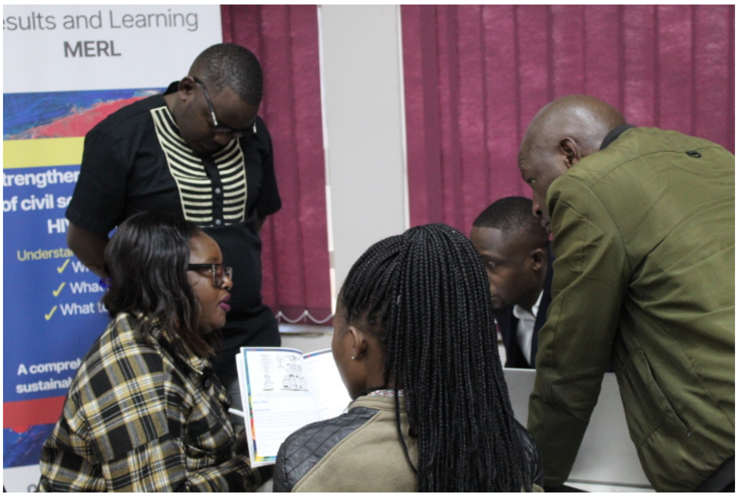
- Press statements/news stories? Policy documents? Program data?

Elements of a Good Story

It is important to write your SPARC story in a way that is captivating and compelling. Below are a few things to keep in mind as you are writing your story:

- Your story must have a clear background.
- It must be descriptive; clearly spell out what happened, where, how, who, to achieve what, and what changed.
- Show clearly why the change is important. Your story must show the significance of the outcome.
- Use simple language that is easy to understand. Acronyms must be unpacked and by all means try to avoid jargon!
- Reflect on the voices of actors in the story by including powerful quotes that help the reader to understand the context and emotions.
- Include a photograph that clearly tells the story; even without caption.

Photographs: A Powerful Tool for Advocacy



Source: https://www.pzat.org

Source: *https://www.gavi.org/*

Source:https://www.compassionuk.org

Source: https://www.pzat.org

We are often drawn to stories in magazines and newspapers, not just by the headlines, but also by the accompanying image. People tend to remember what they see more than what they read. It is therefore useful to add a photograph to your SPARC story so that readers have a visual to keep in memory. A story with a picture makes it more appealing.

Remember that your photograph must tell us what we can expect even before we read your story.

Here are a few good reasons why you should prioritize including a photograph when you tell your SPARC story:

- Images have the power to connect with people on an emotional and subconscious level.
- Images provide the explanation for the numbers; the story behind the story.
- People are drawn to images. Eye-tracking studies show people spend longer looking at images on a website than reading text.
- Our brains process images faster
- Images are a universal language. They can be understood regardless of language differences.
- Images are shared more often than text-only posts. Visual content is more than 40X more likely to get shared on social media than other types of content according to research.

Key Points to Remember

- The SPARC approach helps to create a shared understanding of what success looks like. By sharing stories of successful projects, project teams can develop a common vision for what they want to achieve.

- SPARC prioritizes the use of photographs. Photographs also have the power to evoke emotions and create empathy with the audience. This emotional connection can help to increase engagement with the story and make it more memorable.

Chapter 7: Prioritizing Data Quality

Data Quality

Source: https://www.business2community.com/

As we implement advocacy activities, it is important to pay attention to the quality of data we are gathering. This applies to both qualitative and quantitative data. Remember that data is the evidence we use to make a case for our activities or projects.

We must always seek to uphold a standard of excellence and integrity when collecting and using MERL information. We must try by all means to avoid being biased for personal, political, or any other reasons. Reliable data which has not been manipulated is believable. We stand to get more wins if we ensure that our advocacy evidence is accurate, complete, up-to-date, and ethically mobilized.

MERL information is only useful when it is used! There is no point in spending time collecting information, through consultations, conversations, community monitoring, scrutinizing reports and many other ways, if the information will not add value to your advocacy efforts.

At the center of MERL is the understanding that data is important because it provides a basis for our arguments and forms the foundation of our advocacy asks. In other words, why bother doing the many activities if the information you gather will not be useful or accurate? Always remember that MERL information is key to improving the quality of our advocacy and strengthening our campaigns.

REMEMBER M&E INFORMATION IS USEFUL ONLY IF IT IS USED!

Source: *https://aea365.org*

Key Points to Remember

- Data quality is a crucial aspect of project management that cannot be overlooked. It refers to the accuracy, completeness, and consistency of data used in a project.
- Accurate and reliable data enables project managers to make informed decisions that are based on facts rather than assumptions. It is also important for building trust with stakeholders and ensures that advocacy requests are more likely to be met positivelyThis, in turn, reduces the risk of making wrong decisions that could lead to project failure.
- Poor data quality can lead to incorrect decisions, delays, and increased costs. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that data quality is maintained throughout the project life cycle.
- In conclusion, data quality is an essential aspect of project management that cannot be ignored. It helps in decision-making, ensures projects are completed on time and within budget, and helps in identifying and managing risks.

Three Top Things to Keep in Mind When Conducting MERL

MERL remains a core component of advocacy work. It is something that is done by many stakeholders coming together. It is a day-to-day process, that we must deliberately engage with so that we strengthen our campaigns.

1. MERL Enables us to Improve the Performance of our Activities.

It also strengthens accountability and helps us to make strategic decisions. It is time for advocates to embrace MERL, own it, use it, and benefit from it!

2. Involve everyone!

Assessing advocacy progress and achievements requires the perspectives and inputs of many people. Everyone who has played a role in your campaign, be it big or small, can make a meaningful contribution when it comes to understanding advocacy results. Never be tempted to tell the advocacy story on your own.

Effective advocacy MERL is everyone's business, so make sure to include and involve everyone who needs to be part of the review and planning processes for your project.

3. Fall in love with MERL!

Contrary to many people's beliefs, MERL is easy and interesting. It makes our work meaningful and helps us to figure out solutions to problems that hinder our advocacy. It's time to fully utilize and optimize the benefits of MERL.

Hopefully, after going through this handbook, a love for MERL has been ignited in you! So go ahead and tell someone about MERL, help a fellow advocate, and set yourself up for tangible advocacy wins!

APPENDICES

SPARC (Simple and Participatory Assessment of Real Change) Outcome Story Form

Partner Outcome Story Form
Directions: Please use this form to record significant program outcomes—positive, negative, intended, unintended—that have emerged.
Organization Name:
Date:
Outcome Story Title:
What Happened?

- Basic description of the outcome, including what changed, who was involved, and where and when it happened. Use active verbs to describe this.
- We are trying to record something that another person or organization did differently. Who or which institution is this outcome about?
- What change was observed in a change agent or actor's behavior, actions, practices, or policies that relate to program objectives?

Significance

Highlight why this change is worth noting, important or significant. We are seeking to record the connection between the context and the change.

<u>To decide if the change is significant</u>:

- Is this the first time?
- Does it link into our preliminary assessment—stakeholder analysis and mapping (including conflict and gender analysis), theory of change or the baseline survey?
- Is it big? Small?
- Does it seem to be a systemic change?
- Does it seem to be a policy change?
- Are there fruits of sustainability in there?

Contribution

- What did CASPR do to contribute to this change?
- Here you can record the activities, resources that CASPR put into making the change possible.

Evidence Box

Any documentation, data or other evidence that support this outcome or analysis. This may include physical or electronic emails, notes, phone calls, etc., which demonstrate the changes you are referring to. These can be added to the outcome form as pieces of evidence to substantiate claims, by embedding them or uploading them electronically.

Indicator Checklist

Key questions to ask yourself when defining indicators:

1. Will you be able to collect information on your indicator? If so, where will you get the information from?

2. Is it likely to be accurate (credible)?

3. How much will it cost to get the information in terms of Staff time, Beneficiary time, and Money?

4. How often will you have to collect it?

5. Does it require baseline information? If so, can you get this information?

6. Do your staff have the capacity (or desire) to collect the information honestly and accurately?

7. How far can you attribute the indicator to your efforts?

8. Will the indicator tell you anything you did not know before?

9. Will it help you make decisions to improve future performance?

10. Will it help you to be accountable to different stakeholders?

11. How else will it help you (if at all)?

12. Will it allow you to share information with others to help their own projects and programs? Indicators may be quantitative or qualitative.

13. Might the indicator lead you to further investigation or inquiry?