

Notes from Stakeholder Consultation: Indicator Challenges for Food for Peace-funded Development Food Security Activities

6th of July 2017, Washington, DC

Introduction

Mark Fritzler, Director of The TOPS Program, welcomed everyone and gave a brief introduction of TOPS, its mission and its consortium partners. He also explained the purpose of the consultation and expressed special appreciation to Arif Rashid, former TOPS staff member and currently with Food for Peace, for leading the activity.

“We look forward to coming out with some really strong and jointly shared suggestions and solutions at the end of this consultation.”

Mark Fritzler
The TOPS Program

Laurie Starr, Theory of Change | Monitoring & Evaluation Senior Specialist at The TOPS Program, greeted in-person and online participants and remarked that many countries where Food for Peace (FFP) is funding activities were represented. She further explained that interviews with Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Task Force members and other M&E professionals in the food security community revealed three topics of particular interest that the consultation aimed to address:

- 1) The number of indicators
- 2) How data are used
- 3) Implementing partner involvement in the baseline studies and final evaluation

Laurie explained that there would probably not be time to dig into other topics of interest, but that these three issues would be discussed at depth during this consultation. She also stressed that there is no need to wait for a TOPS consultation to discuss M&E issues with FFP. Implementing partners can always reach out to their M&E colleagues at FFP with questions and concerns.

Regarding the objectives for the consultation, Laurie explained that they were two-fold. Firstly, to gain a better understanding of challenges faced by *both parties*. And secondly – once these challenges were understood – to work together to find *common solutions* that meet the needs of both parties.

That being said, Food for Peace cannot make any decisions at the consultation but will need to go back and discuss internally before any solutions can be introduced.

Session I: Number of Food for Peace indicators

Plenary discussion part 1: Root causes for implementing partners' concerns about the number of FFP indicators

Laurie Starr introduced the first session and mentioned some of the concerns raised in the interviews with M&E staff, including how the number of indicators has had negative impact on budgets, staff motivation, data collection responsibilities, and even on beneficiaries (because staff is forced to spend time on indicators instead of programming). Others stated that the problem was not the number of indicators, but rather the level of disaggregation.

Laurie opened up the floor and encouraged participants representing implementing partners to be *specific* when explaining how the number of indicators is affecting their activities (be it too many or too few).

- The overwhelming number of indicators on all levels (baseline, annual, endline, etc.), provides a challenge in terms of management, i.e. data collection, data analysis, and data use.
- The large number of indicators (some programs have Indicator Performance Tracking Tables (IPTTs) with 1,500 lines) also makes it impossible for the technical teams to grasp, barring them from using the indicators as a base for what to prioritize to 'move the needle' and reach a target.
- Too many indicators and a lack of grasp of both baseline and endline indicators during the course of implementation, to know whether a program is 'moving that needle' or not.
- There are also often specific things that need to be measured that can be difficult to incorporate into the other indicators. Thus, there is a need for a few more *custom* indicators in the baseline and endline.
- The large number of required if applicable (RiA) indicators is creating a problem for data management.
- The criteria is so large that we end up with too many indicators since everything is applicable.
- There is a need for indicators that can be used for monitoring progress among *beneficiaries* throughout the project (unlike baseline and endline that are based on general population, not beneficiaries).

- There are both too many and too few indicators. In order to properly monitor our complex theories of change, we need many indicators. On the other hand, this puts an enormous burden on implementing organizations.
- At the same time there are not enough indicators, particularly regarding systemic change indicators. Currently there are a lot of topic-leading indicators but in the long run, systems should be in place to provide services and there should be a reduced need for topic-leading indicators. The lack of systemic change indicators leads us to design programs that are very detail oriented and focused on number of households, etc. rather than on building systems for service delivery.
- A high number of indicators also means bigger questionnaires, which can compromise the quality of the data collected.

Laurie asked participants if they could share more details on how the number of indicators affects other issues, like staff motivation, data collection, and budgets, for example.

- The sheer number of indicators make data collection a hugely time-consuming task which takes away time from analyzing the collected data. The focus is only on collecting data and getting the annual review report ready, rather than actually analyzing the data to learn and draw conclusions on how to adjust and adapt programming for the coming year accordingly.
- The annual monitoring beneficiary surveys require a huge amount of staff time and resources to conduct.
- Our theories of change may be complex and require many indicators, but it is still important to be selective and only chose the most relevant ones.
- Staff are not excited about reporting how many people have adopted a new behavior change for example. They don't know these numbers.
- The indicators measure the 'what' but not the 'why' and therefore does not tell the story that staff would like to tell about their programs and activities and results. We report that 150 kilometers of road were built, but not what it meant for the community.

Clarifying question/comment from FFP:

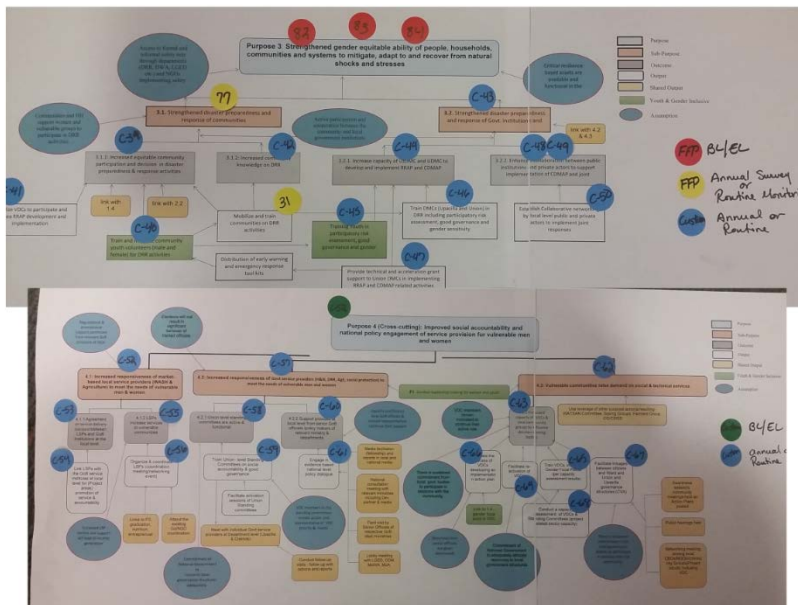
- Regarding the last two points: if the goal of a project is to introduce a new practice, shouldn't staff be able and interested to measure if beneficiaries are actually adopting the new practice? And for the 'what' versus the 'why,' there is absolutely space to tell the story of what the road meant for the community (for example) in the annual results report narrative, as a success story, or by using qualitative methods to answer the 'why' or complement the quantitative data for telling your story.

Remarks by Arif Rashid, Senior Monitoring and Evaluation Advisor, USAID and USDA, M&E Team Leader at Food for Peace

Arif Rashid introduced the Food for Peace M&E staff in the room and explained that he was the first M&E advisor in 2013 and since then the team has grown significantly. The team is continuously developing and strengthening their own capacity to better serve implementing organizations. He further explained that Food for Peace reports to and receives funding from Feed the Future. Out of the 32 annual FFP monitoring indicators, 18 indicators come from Feed the Future and FFP has no control over these. This list will change once the new Global Food Security Strategy indicators are finalized, but for now, this is the situation. In addition, FFP has about 12 indicators incorporated in their baseline and endline indicators that come from Feed the Future. Out of the 32 annual monitoring indicators, only one is required.

FFP studied a number of Private Voluntary Organizations' (PVOs) theories of change and came to the conclusion that when designing a project and defining outcomes, there should always be at least one indicator for each outcome specified in the logframe.

Arif displayed a logframe poster from a PVO theory of change:



- Yellow dots are FFP annual monitoring indicators.
- Blue dots are custom indicators identified by the implementing partner.
- Red dots are FFP baseline/endline indicators

Question/comment from PVO:

Many times we design a project, including logframe and theory of change, and find that there are gaps among the indicators. We look at what our project intends to do, the activities and the outcomes, but there are no indicators on the list to support them. With no indicators matching

the project outcomes, we end up creating a large number of custom indicators that many times are ‘spontaneously’ created. How, for example, do we measure if women have become empowered through a project? There is a lack of indicators that truly reflect/tell the full story of a project.

Reply from FFP:

Yes, there is a need for more applicable indicators, but current indicators can help us tell the whole story. By measuring how many farmers attended trainings, how many farmers then adopted new behaviors, how many of these farmers were women, how were their food security situation changed with the new behavior, and so forth, a story of impact can be told.

Question/comment from PVO:

Sometimes missions must report on additional indicators that are not included in the project IPTT.

Reply from FFP:

It is FFP’s goal to consolidate mission and FFP indicators, so please reach out to FFP if you discover mission-specific indicators that fall outside the FFP list. However, there will always be a number of indicators that the mission wants to include.

Question/comment from PVO:

Indicators will never be enough to tell the entire story of project outcomes. There will always be unintended outcomes that we need to capture. What are the qualitative tools we can use for this purpose?

Reply from FFP:

Correct. That is why FFP’s Policy and Guidance for DFSAs states that partners should allocate 3%–5% of the total activity budget specifically for program monitoring, and that can be not only quantitative but also qualitative measurement and other relevant activities to capture all outcomes of a project. Qualitative tools may vary depending on the questions you are trying to answer or the objectives.

Question/comment from PVO:

Since FFP is going to contract the baseline/endline consultants, are they (consultants) going to accept adding PVO custom indicators or they will only focus on FFP indicators?

Reply from FFP:

At the outset, in the contract with the consultant, FFP has to specify which indicators should be included and the exact number of additional unknown indicators. Since these contracts cover multiple countries and projects, this is a challenge.

A second challenge is that FFP wants to minimize the number of baseline indicators. Too many baseline indicators lead to very time-consuming surveys, and with long surveys the quality of the collected data is compromised.

PVOs can collect data on their custom indicators from beneficiaries directly; FFP is not opposed to that.

Session 2: Data use

Group work: discuss the following questions:

How are the implementing partners using the annual monitoring data to revisit the theory of change (ToC)? To revise targets? To revise implementation?

- The data has been used mostly to revisit targets and implementation, not so much to revisit the ToC.
- The response/feedback from FFP on annual reporting can often take a long time, which makes it difficult to use the data when revising a project since the revision is already done once the feedback arrives.
- One group discussed obstacles/drivers of the use of data in decision/making:
 - The quality and capacity of the M&E staff. Many times project proposals are focused on competitiveness and do not budget for high quality M&E staff.
 - The quality of IP's own databases.
 - The high number of indicators stand in the way for learning and qualitative research that can tell the story behind the indicators.
- Annual monitoring data is used to revise geographic targeting in conflict situations.
- Annual monitoring data is used to inform the midterm revisiting of the ToC.
- Annual monitoring data does not inform the ToC at all, because:
 - It is not required
 - Lack of capacity
 - Lack of guidance on how to do it
 - Concern about quality of the data

- There does not seem to be a general or widespread understanding among our field teams and M&E staff on how to use data to validate or revise our theory of change. The ToC is a new thing and how to use data to adjust it is something people have not yet learned.

How are you using your baseline data to determine beneficiary targeting? To revise the theory of change? To revise project interventions?

- The data has not been used for initial targeting because it came too late, but has been used to modify targets.
- In the specific case of Madagascar, we used the extensive baseline data to tweak our targets.
- If you are going to re-target in year 2 or if you're doing a refine and implement program that hasn't started yet, you can possibly use the baseline data, if your Pipeline and Resource Estimate Proposal (PREP) for year 2 is submitted later than the baseline data. If your PREP is submitted before the baseline data there is not much you can do until year 3.

Which, if any, indicators do you find most useful for programmatic decisions?

- 8, 9, 15, 54, 60, 80

Which, if any, indicators are not very useful for decision-making? Please focus only on FFP indicators (not Feed the Future indicators, since there is no room for change regarding those).

- Difficult to say since it depends a lot on context.
- Difficult to say since most indicators are useful when triangulated with other factors (other indicators, qualitative data, etc.). This kind of triangulation requires a lot of sophistication and many times the technical capacity for this kind of M&E work does not exist within projects.
- The least useful are the Feed the Future indicators.
- 8, 81, 36. Both 8 and 36 are complex indicators regarding growth margin and incremental sales, which are not relevant when working with smallholders with limited land for production.
- The indicator of how many people are trained is not useful for revising implementation of ToC.

Remarks by Arif Rashid: How is FFP using the data?

- Feed the Future Annual Progress Report. Audience: Congress, USG, and other stakeholders.
- Department of State and USAID Annual Performance Plan and Report (PPR). Audience: USG and Congress.
- FFP Annual Report.
- ARR Highlights. A summary of annual results reports submitted by the development projects.
- Refine and Implement. Based on 2012 evaluation reports, FFP decided to pilot Refine and Implement.
- Annual Emergency Food Security Programs (EFSP) Progress in West Africa. Audience: FFP West Africa region.
- Mid-Term Evaluations – Malawi and Madagascar. Annual monitoring data are used to inform mid-term evaluations and to review project ToC.
- FFP Performance Monitoring. CBOs and the mission use annual monitoring data to measure activity performance.
- Examples of data utilization from Zimbabwe and Uganda.

Question from PVO:

It seems implementing partners are mixing the use of cumulative and non-cumulative data. How does that affect the FFP annual reporting to congress? It is concerning if we are not consistent and either over- or underreporting.

Reply from FFP:

It is true that guidance on this has not existed before. FFP will soon share revised guidance which will identify cumulative or non-cumulative indicators. Please also refer to the FFP Policy and Guidance for DFSAs on the definitions of cumulative and non-cumulative indicators (with examples). FFP usually goes back to the implementing partner to clarify if the reported data is cumulative or not.

Question from PVO:

Which of the indicators are most useful for FFP?

Reply from FFP:

It depends on what they are used for and the audience. We also work with universities to analyze data.

Question from PVO:

Do you look at how data reported by all PVOs correlate?

Reply from FFP:

Yes, this is something we like to do and hope to do more of. For example we are studying gross margin data that were reported by every single PVO we are working with to see what the data tells us.

Question from PVO:

What about use of the data by FFP technical sector team (non-M&E team)?

Reply from FFP:

I don't know exactly, but WASH is an area that the technical team is very interested in regarding data.

Question from PVO:

Is there any advocacy for FFP to do more in using all of the endline data available to showcase our impact to Congress?

Reply from FFP:

We have not thought about that since the report to Congress is mostly driven by USDA. But we will think about it.

Question from PVO:

Are there plans to conduct a meta-analysis of all the reported data?

Reply from FFP:

Yes, that is the plan, especially once all the endline data is available.

Session 3: Finding solutions

Small group work: Explore solutions, share tips

Laurie Starr summarized challenges discussed so far:

- **Limited ownership:** Concern regarding limited ownership of baseline and endline surveys and studies and the need for more room for custom indicators. *This issue will be discussed in Session 4 – Implementing partners’ involvement in third party studies.*
- **Volume of data:** The sheer volume of data is limiting our ability to use it. The sheer volume of data is limiting time for program activities. The volume of data forces M&E staff to focus only on data inputting, with no time for analysis (even if they have the capacity for it).
- **RiA criteria:** The RiA criteria results in all indicators being included. Even if we want to limit the number of indicators, when looking at the RiA criteria it seems all indicators are applicable.
- **Culture of learning:** What is preventing a culture of learning where staff are interested in the collected data and see the value of it? Capacity issues, lack of feeling of ownership among field staff.
- **Theory of change paradox:** The available indicators are not enough to understand change and manage a program. But the more indicators we add, the greater the burden. Need to prioritize and be selective when choosing indicators for the ToC.
- **Management capacity and budget:** Prioritizing budget for M&E on studies, staff, etc.

Theory of change paradox

- **Suggestion:** Include in the PREP guidance a reminder that you should be reviewing annual monitoring data to revise your theory of change.
- **Suggestion:** Remove some of the required applicable indicators, specifically 8 and 16. However, those are Feed the Future indicators and cannot be removed. A suggested approach for prioritization was to focus monitoring on indicators that affect the largest number of beneficiaries, thus not monitoring number 8 and 16 since they usually affect very few people.
- Are there qualitative ways that we can measure our non-required custom indicators? Would FFP be interested in this qualitative data?

RiA criteria

- In some cases when we look at the annual monitoring indicators, the applicability criteria is much broader than the indicator itself. **Suggestion:** Ensure that the specificity in the applicability matches the indicator.
- Lack of clarity – do you take all of the outcomes from the ToC that you have RiA and put them into the logframe and monitor them, including those outcomes you may not directly affect?

FFP replied: Outcomes that you are not directly affecting should not be included in the logframe, it should be put as an assumption. If the assumption is expected to affect your project's outcome, it is probably a good idea to monitor it but that is up to the chief of party to decide.

Suggestion: Clarify when and how an implementing partner can decide whether to include an RiA indicator or not.

Volume of data

- **Suggestion:** Perhaps FFP could consider letting IPs prioritize targets? They would still monitor all required applicable indicators but only have targets for some.
- **Suggestion:** Limit the amount of disaggregation.
- Lack of clarity – how is the data being used? What does the Congress really want? Are IPs reporting things that are not useful?
- **Suggestion:** Streamline ARR, Standard Annual Performance Questionnaire (SAPQ), IPTTs and PREP review processes

Budget

- **Suggestion:** Clarify rules and guidelines for using the 5% budget dedication for M&E – should mid-term review be included or not, etc. and what are FFP's recommended use of the 5%?
- **Suggestion:** Require in the RFA that the M&E manager is part of the key staff (as in the last FFP RFA) and include specification of what qualifications that person should have.
- **Suggestion:** Make sure M&E staff is involved in the defining the project budget.

Culture of Learning

- Primary issue is lack of time. **Suggestion:** IPs can contract out the data collection for the qualitative piece to allow time for the M&E team to focus on the analysis and feeding back the learning.
- **Suggestion:** Projects need to properly plan and budget for *all* M&E activities and define and specify the learning agenda. Include how qualitative data can complement reporting and thinking a bit outside the box when explaining to the donor why some indicators are not useful, etc.

Session 4: Third-party baseline studies/final evaluation and solutions

FFP gave an overview of how third-party studies are conducted and the key ways FFP involve implementing partners are:

- Baseline workshop of 3-4 days where:
 - Food for Peace Evaluation and Learning Mechanism (EVELYN) gives an overview of the process
 - FFP works with the implementing partner to contextualize the survey, making sure it is relevant for the country
 - Reach consensus on next steps and discuss custom indicators, making sure the survey does not become too long by adding too many custom indicators. Maybe custom indicators are already covered under existing questions.
 - Qualitative tools are discussed.
 - Qualitative site selection is discussed.
- Throughout the process monthly calls are held to keep all stakeholders updated (field staff, mission staff, HQ staff, FFP staff, etc.).
- Utilization workshop (for example in Bangladesh)
- Asking for input from IPs on pre-cursor documents.

Comments/suggestions:

- **Suggestion:** Include a workshop on the utilization of baseline data as a standard component of every project (like the one mentioned in Bangladesh).
- Is there some way within the refine and implement programs that the qualitative studies done by the implementing partner can replace (to some extent) the qualitative work being done by the contractor?
- Through the studies performed by the IP, staff go out into the field, which is something that doesn't happen in the third-party baseline studies.
- If we want to do studies on the system level indicators, that is something that can be taken into account qualitatively.
- **Suggestion:** There should be a mechanism for IPs to express objections or concerns based on previous experiences with a certain company before a contract is signed.

FFP replied: *We are sometimes limited by available options in-country, but please always let us know of any red flags.*

- **Suggestion:** Participation in enumerated training should not be left at the discretion of the contractor, the PVO should always have that option.



Arif Rashid thanked everyone and promised to bring back all the feedback shared during the consultation to discuss internally within FFP and incorporate in future guidance, etc.

Laurie Starr thanked everyone for their participation and concluded the session.