

# Implementation Tips for USAID Partners

Sharing Resources and Knowledge Among the Global CSO Community

Monitoring and Evaluation 1 | 2018

## Definitions

**Evidence**—A range of tangible/factual information that can be used to support or contradict decisions made when planning interventions.

**Indicator**—A characteristic or dimension that will be used to measure change. Height is an example of an indicator.

**Problem Tree**—A tool or technique used to analyze the “causes” and “effects” of problems. The output is a graphical arrangement of problems differentiated according to causes and effects, joined by a core, or focal, problem. This technique helps demonstrate the context and interrelationship of problems and potential impacts when targeting projects, programs or interventions toward specific issues.

**Stakeholder**—An individual, community, or institutional entity that will be affected by, or who can affect, your project.

**Goal**—The long-term result that your project is seeking to achieve.

**Objective**—A shorter term achievement that contributes toward achieving the goal.

## Using Evidence to Inform All Stages of the Project Cycle

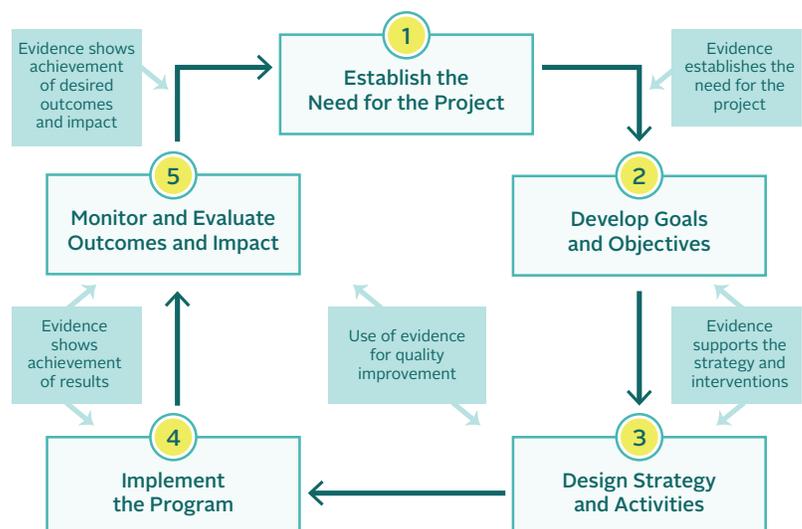
**Q.** What is evidence-based planning and how can it improve our project?

**A.** Evidence-based project planning is the use of objective information to reach the best possible outcome(s) when making decisions about your project. It involves integrating the best possible research evidence with project design experience, sector expertise and knowledge of the needs of the target population

Explore the data you have available, extract evidence from these data, and use this information to inform your interventions. Using evidence in every stage of the project cycle promotes informed decision making and helps achieve significant, sustainable change through project interventions. What follows describes how evidence may be used to inform a project at all stages of the project cycle.

### Evidence and the Project Life Cycle

The project life cycle follows a basic, logical sequence of steps. It starts with identifying a problem and developing solutions for that problem. The cycle continues with implementing activities and concludes with evaluating project results. Different organizations will use different planning methods to suit their needs, but evidence can be used to inform decision making at every stage of the life cycle, as illustrated in the diagram below.



## References

[Catholic Relief Services, 2004, Propack, The CRS Project Package](#)

[Pathfinder International, 2008, Evidence-based Planning for Sustainability of Government Reproductive Health Services.](#)

[Civicus Strategic Planning Toolkit](#)

[USAID's TIPS series.](#) Practical advice and suggestions on issues related to performance management and evaluation. These publications are supplemental references to the Automated Directive System (ADS) Chapter 203.

[USAID Learning Lab](#)

## Establishing the Need for the Project

To start, you establish the need for an intervention. No matter how big or small your project is, you will need to collect and analyze information about the social, political, economic and/or health situation of your target group to make decisions about the real needs, priority problems, vulnerabilities and opportunities that affect the problem you want to address.

For example, if you are planning to improve the care and support of orphans and vulnerable children (OVC), you will want to gather information about the number of OVC in the community, the characteristics of these children (and their families) and what resources are currently available in the community to help OVC. Once you have collected evidence, you can use tools such as a Problem Tree to define your core problem and map the causes and effects of the problem. (*See the sidebar for guidance on the Problem Tree analysis.*)

You can also get useful evidence to describe the dimensions of the problem and support the need for your intervention from studies from the Ministry of Health, research available online, academic publications and/or speaking with community residents and other stakeholders. Ask questions of different types of people in your community, such as grandmothers and teachers, to gather insights about the problem, collect comprehensive information to feed into your project design and establish the need for the project.

## Developing Goals and Objectives

Use evidence to develop goals and objectives that are achievable. Look at existing interventions that tackle similar problems to develop realistic goals/objectives for the resources you have available.

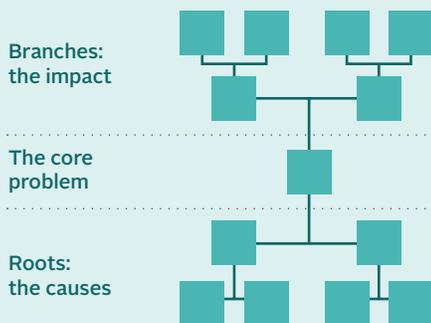
Test your assumptions. For example, if you are providing OVC with school uniforms and materials, are you going to reach a goal to improve the level of education of OVC in your community? In reality, your project inputs might help more OVC go to school, and even stay in school, but there is no guarantee that they will learn once they are there. Review carefully what your project will actually do, and reflect critically on what results you can expect to achieve.

## Designing Your Intervention Strategy

Once you have established your goals and objectives, begin to design the strategies most likely to be effective in your intervention. Keep an open mind. Analyze all the evidence you have collected before you design the best ways to respond to the problem. Review available reports or evaluations of previous related interventions to design a realistic approach, rather than one you think might work. Take into account contextual factors such as cost or other actors in the environment, in addition to resources required to address intended

## Problem Tree Steps

1. List all the problems that come to mind. Problems need to be carefully identified. They should be existing problems, not possible, imagined or future ones. A problem is an existing negative situation; it is not the absence of a solution.
2. Identify a core problem (this is the trunk of the tree). It may require considerable trial and error before settling on only one core problem.
3. Determine which problems are “causes” (roots) and which are “effects” (branches).
4. Arrange the causes and effects in hierarchal order on your tree (in other words, show how the causes relate to each other—which one leads to the other).



Source: <http://web.mit.edu/urbanupgrading/upgrading/issues-tools/tools/problem-tree.html>

**Tip:** To make the most of this process, it is critical to involve all stakeholders in creating your Problem Tree. Your organization may even wish to invest in hiring a facilitator to guide the process to ensure you arrive at the best analysis.

and unintended consequences of project activities. Be sure to engage a range of stakeholders to ensure your strategies are realistic and address the specific problems identified in the cause–effect analysis in the Problem Tree. In the health sector, for example, strategies should be developed based on patients’, providers’ and other stakeholders’ perspectives on the situation and need. In addition, agree with stakeholders on what indicators will be used to measure your success in the project and how often you will review these indicators.

## Using Evidence in Project Implementation

It is simply not possible to manage the technical side of your project effectively without regularly monitoring your project’s progress. This involves systematically gathering and analyzing information about what you are doing, who you are reaching and whether activities are being implemented according to plan. Use your project indicators to not only measure progress, but also to make evidence-based decisions that can improve the project’s impact. In some cases, monitoring data may show that interventions are not achieving their objectives. Use this information, along with discussions with stakeholders (service providers, the target population, program managers) to make project adjustments as necessary.

For example, if HIV-prevention activities in an OVC-support project fail to attract adolescent male OVC, the organization needs to find out why and adjust its strategies accordingly. In one example, the data revealed that adolescent male OVC chose instead to participate in competing activities, such as job training or sports activities. Consequently, the organization decided to offer its HIV-prevention activities at a time and place more appealing to this target group.

## For More Information

For this or other issues of *Implementation Tips*, please visit [www.NGOConnect.net](http://www.NGOConnect.net). The Web site is a dynamic and interactive portal dedicated to connecting and strengthening CSOs, networks and CSO support organizations worldwide.

Funding for this publication was provided by the U.S. Agency for International Development, under the Strengthening Civil Society (SCS) Global Leader Award. Its contents, managed by SCS Global, do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the U.S. Government.

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## Evaluating Outcomes and Impact

Finally, evidence is critical to demonstrate program impact—that is, significant, sustainable changes in a target population or community after an intervention is completed. Impact differs from measuring outputs—for example, counting the number of people trained and/or the number reached with certain interventions.

Impact also differs from looking at outcomes, which are the short- to medium-term observable behavioral, institutional and/or societal effects of an intervention's outputs. Impact indicators are about change over time. Use indicators to measure whether your work is having an effect on the quality of life of your project's beneficiaries.

