Introduction to Outcome Measurement

If yours is like most human service agencies or youth- and family-serving organizations, you regularly monitor and report on how much money you receive, how many staff and volunteers you have, and what they do in your programs. You know how many individuals participate in your programs, how many hours you spend serving them, and how many brochures or classes or counseling sessions you produce. In other words, you document program *inputs, activities, and outputs.*

- **Inputs** include resources dedicated to or consumed by the program. Examples are money, staff and staff time, volunteers and volunteer time, facilities, equipment, and supplies. For instance, inputs for a parent education class include the hours of staff time spent designing and delivering the program. Inputs also include constraints on the program, such as laws, regulations, and requirements for receipt of funding.

- **Activities** are what the program does with the inputs to fulfill its mission. Activities include the strategies, techniques, and types of treatment that comprise the program's service methodology. For instance, sheltering and feeding homeless families are program activities, as are training and counseling homeless adults to help them prepare for and find jobs.

- **Outputs** are the direct products of program activities and usually are measured in terms of the volume of work accomplished—for example, the numbers of classes taught, counseling sessions conducted, educational materials distributed, and participants served. Outputs have little inherent value in themselves. They are important because they are intended to lead to a desired benefit for participants or target populations.

  If given enough resources, managers can control output levels. In a parent education class, for example, the number of classes held and the number of parents served are outputs. With enough staff and supplies, the program could double its output of classes and participants.

If yours is like most human service organizations, you do *not* consistently track what happens to participants after they receive your services. You cannot report, for example, that 55 percent of your participants used more appropriate approaches to conflict management after your youth development program conducted sessions on that skill, or that your public awareness program was followed by a 20 percent increase in the number of low-income parents getting their children immunized. In other words, you do not have much information on your program's *outcomes*.

- **Outcomes** are benefits or changes for individuals or populations during or after participating in program activities. They are influenced by a program's outputs. Outcomes may relate to behavior, skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, condition, or other attributes. They are what participants know, think, or can do; or how they behave; or what their condition is, that is different following the program.

For example, in a program to counsel families on financial management, outputs—what the service produces—include the number of financial planning sessions and the number of families seen. The desired outcomes—the changes sought in participants' behavior or status—can include their developing and living within a budget, making monthly additions to a savings account, and having increased financial stability.

> "We didn't have this information before. We knew the number of people we'd seen, but didn't really know if the services had made a difference for the client. Today, no one pays you to 'do good.' They pay for effectiveness."
>
> *Ellie Gersten, Director, East Valley Catholic Social Services, Mesa, Arizona*

In another example, outputs of a neighborhood clean-up campaign can be the number of organizing meetings held and the number of weekends dedicated to the clean-up effort. Outcomes—benefits to the target population—might include reduced exposure to safety hazards and increased feelings of neighborhood pride. Exhibit A depicts the relationship between inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes.

Note: *Outcomes* sometimes are confused with outcome ***indicators***, specific items of data that are tracked to measure how well a program is achieving an outcome, and with outcome ***targets***, which are objectives for a program's level of achievement.

For example, in a youth development program that creates internship opportunities for high school youth, an ***outcome*** might be that participants develop expanded views of their career options. An ***indicator*** of how well the program is succeeding on this outcome could be the number and percent of participants who list more careers of interest to them at the end of the program than they did at the beginning of the program. A ***target*** might be that *40 percent of participants list at least two more careers* after completing the program than they did when they started it. Outcome indicators and targets are discussed in Steps 3 and 8, respectively.

Exhibit A

Summary of Program Outcome Model

INPUTS → ACTIVITIES → OUTPUTS → OUTCOMES

INPUTS

Resources dedicated to or consumed by the program

e.g.
- money
- staff and staff time
- volunteers and volunteer time
- facilities
- equipment and supplies

Constraints on the program

e.g.
- laws
- regulations
- funders' requirements

ACTIVITIES

What the program does with the inputs to fulfill its mission

e.g.
- feed and shelter homeless families
- provide job training
- educate the public about signs of child abuse
- counsel pregnant women
- create mentoring relationships for youth

OUTPUTS

The direct products of program activities

e.g.
- number of classes taught
- number of counseling sessions conducted
- number of educational materials distributed
- number of hours of service delivered
- number of participants served

OUTCOMES

Benefits for participants during and after program activities

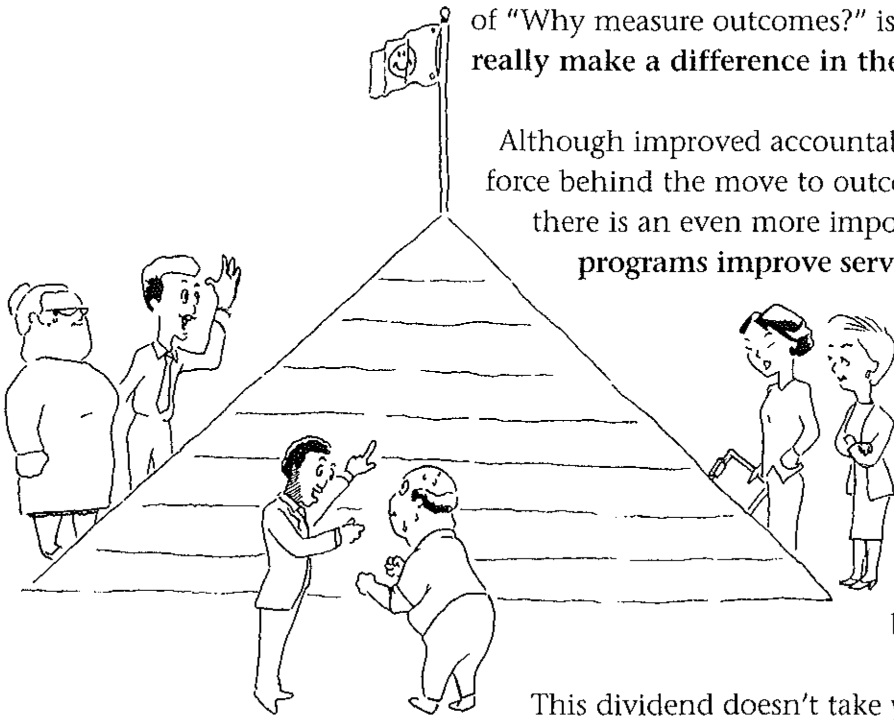
e.g.
- new knowledge
- increased skills
- changed attitudes or values

  ↓
- modified behavior

  ↓
- improved condition
- altered status

Why Measure Outcomes?

In growing numbers, service providers, governments, other funders, and the public are calling for clearer evidence that the resources they expend actually produce benefits for people. Consumers of services and volunteers who provide services want to know that programs to which they devote their time really make a difference. That is, they want better accountability for the use of resources. One clear and compelling answer to the question of "Why measure outcomes?" is: **To see if programs really make a difference in the lives of people.**



Although improved accountability has been a major force behind the move to outcome measurement, there is an even more important reason: **To help programs improve services.** Outcome measurement provides a learning loop that feeds information back into programs on how well they are doing. It offers findings they can use to adapt, improve, and become more effective.

This dividend doesn't take years to occur. It often starts appearing early in the process of setting up an outcome measurement system. Just the process of focusing on outcomes—on why the program is doing what it's doing and how it thinks participants will be better off—gives program managers and staff a clearer picture of the purpose of their efforts. That clarification alone frequently leads to more focused and productive service delivery.

Down the road, being able to demonstrate that their efforts are making a difference for people pays important dividends for programs. It can, for example, help programs:

- Recruit and retain talented staff.
- Enlist and motivate able volunteers.
- Attract new participants.
- Engage collaborators.
- Garner support for innovative efforts.
- Win designation as a model or demonstration site.
- Retain or increase funding.
- Gain favorable public recognition.

Results of outcome measurement show not only where services are being effective for participants, but also where outcomes are not as expected. Program managers can use outcome data to:

- Strengthen existing services.
- Target effective services for expansion.
- Identify staff and volunteer training needs.
- Develop and justify budgets.
- Prepare long-range plans.
- Focus board members' attention on programmatic issues.

"Outcome measurement has been a tremendous benefit to our agency by clarifying the services we provide. It has helped the staff, clients, board, constituents, and funders. We have a whole list of topics to talk about and we are all on the same page. This is concrete data. We can compare success versus instances where there was not success and draw parallels."
Nina Waters, Executive Director, Practical and Cultural Education (PACE) Center for Girls, Jacksonville, Florida

To increase its internal efficiency, a program needs to track its inputs and outputs. To assess compliance with service delivery standards, a program needs to monitor activities and outputs. But to improve its effectiveness in helping participants, to assure potential participants and funders that its programs produce results, and to show the general public that it produces benefits that merit support, an agency needs to measure its outcomes.

These and other benefits of outcome measurement are not just theoretical. Scores of human service providers across the country attest to the difference it has made—for their staff, their volunteers, their decision makers, their financial situation, their reputation, and, most important, for the public they serve. The rewards have been impressive enough to lead governments and private funders to pick up the idea. The 1993 Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), for example, requires federal programs to identify and measure their outcomes. Many foundations now require programs they fund to measure and report on outcomes.

About This Manual

Measuring Program Outcomes: A Practical Approach is written for executive directors and program managers in a broad range of services. These include not only intervention and remediation programs for individuals and families experiencing difficulties, but also prevention and development programs that protect and enhance well-being. The manual relates not only to direct-service providers, but also to programs engaged in advocacy, public education, capacity building, and related activities. The manual refers to this broad constellation of programs by the general term of "human services."

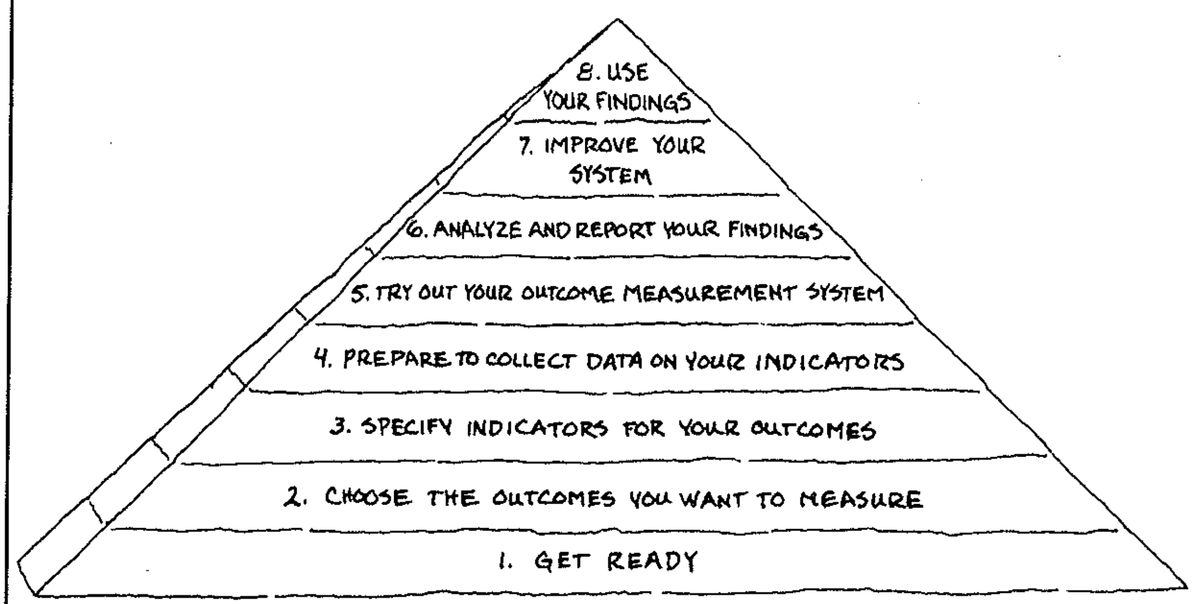
Measuring Program Outcomes provides a step-by-step approach to developing a system for measuring program outcomes and using the results. The approach, based on methods implemented successfully by agencies across the country, is presented in eight steps, shown in Exhibit B. Although the illustration suggests that the steps are sequential, this is actually a dynamic process with a good deal of interplay among stages.

To help illustrate the steps and their relationships to each other, *Measuring Program Outcomes* follows four hypothetical programs through the process of planning for outcome measurement. These programs are introduced in Step 2. The manual also provides worksheets and other tools to help you plan your program's outcome measurement system.

Experiences of human service providers who have implemented outcome measurement in their programs are spotlighted throughout the manual. They offer their encouragement, and their assurances that real benefits of this effort enjoyed by real programs can be gained by your program as well.

Exhibit B

Measuring Program Outcomes: Eight Steps to Success



Measuring Program Outcomes is designed to apply to diverse agencies and programs. It makes no assumptions about agency size, budget, funding sources, level of computerization, setting, or participant characteristics. However, a one-size-fits-all guide to developing an outcome measurement system is not realistic. Parts of the manual may miss the mark for some readers in one or more ways. For example:

- Readers with training in program assessment may find the material in some sections to be too elementary. They can simply move on to the next section.
- Readers with no program assessment experience who need or want more detail can refer to the bibiography for more specialized references.
- The nature of some programs presents particular challenges related to identifying and measuring outcomes. Examples include advocacy programs (how do you measure system change?), prevention programs (how do you measure that something did not happen?), and programs that have only one-time contact with participants (how do you assess change in individuals you never see again?). The manual discusses special issues confronting various types of programs and offers suggestions for dealing with them.

It should be stressed that the processes and procedures described here are *not* the only valid approach to designing an outcome measurement system. Other organizations have prepared useful guides on the subject, as well as more comprehensive program assessment systems of which outcome measurement is a part. Agencies should use whatever model or combination provides guidance that meets their needs most closely. Funders are urged to respect this approach by focusing on the merits of a program's measurement process, rather than on the details of how the program went about developing the process.

Notes About Terminology

Just as programs use different approaches to create outcome measurement strategies, so they apply different terms to various aspects of what this manual calls "outcome measurement." This Introduction defines some key terms as they are used in this manual. Other terms are defined as they are introduced.

When communicating with others, and particularly with funders, agencies are advised to use whatever terms will communicate most effectively with that audience. Funders, on the other hand, should recognize that different systems label outcomes as "client impacts," "program results," "effects," and other terms. The important issue must be the benefits of services for people, not the words used to describe them.

Two other notes about terminology are important for this manual's audience.

- The service providers for whom this manual is intended call themselves by varying terms, including "agency," "organization," "council," "program," "society," and "club." The manual uses the term "agency," in its meaning of a business or service that acts for others, to denote this broad spectrum of organizations dedicated to strengthening and empowering families and individuals.

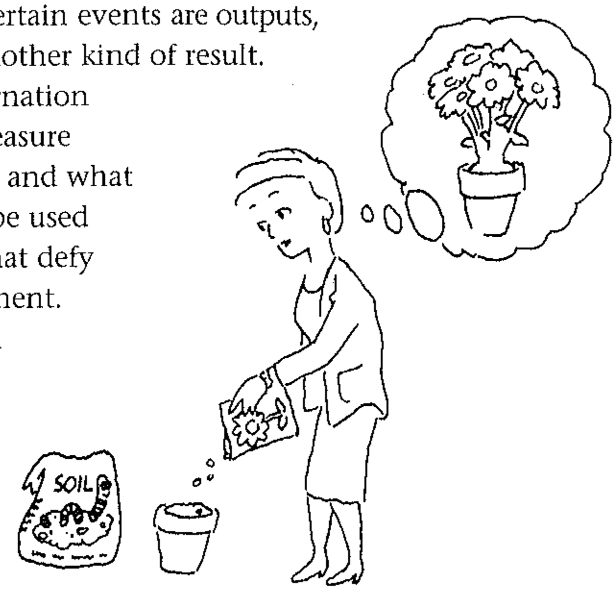
- Agencies refer to those who participate in their programs by many terms, including "client," "customer," "recipient," "enrollee," and "member." This manual uses the term "participant" to represent the individuals and families whom the agency serves. As used in this manual, "participant" does not refer to program staff or volunteers.

In Conclusion

> "For those of us in the social service world, there's a certain trepidation in really finding out what we do. People should be excited about this possibility. There's no such thing as failure—it's feedback and shows where to make changes. It's a whole new arena now. I've been in social services for 20 years and, especially in prevention work, we've never been able to show what's effective. Now with this we're on the horizon of showing what works."
>
> *Judy Selle,*
> *Executive Director,*
> *Neighborhood House,*
> *Milwaukee, Wisconsin*

Outcome measurement is not a passing fad. In the years ahead, collecting data on benefits for program participants will be as common as collecting data on the number of program participants is today. Measurement methods and tools will have been refined, there will be greater agreement on terminology and criteria, and the subject will be part of the core curriculum in college and university courses for human service professionals.

Currently, however, the concept is relatively new and many issues are unresolved. There is debate over whether certain events are outputs, outcomes, or another kind of result. There is consternation over how to measure some outcomes and what surrogates can be used for outcomes that defy direct measurement. There is tension between the need for technically sound methodologies, which can be expensive and time consuming, and the staffing, funding, and workload realities that constrain nearly all service agencies.



This manual does not pretend to resolve these issues. It does, however, lay groundwork that will continue to be tested and refined. As the field progresses, the manual will be revised and updated. For now, its purpose is to provide help for those committed to improving the quality of life of people they serve.