

Recognizing Good Practices in the Development of Baseline Studies

Baselines are the most often overlooked component of the planning and implementation cycle of development projects, yet they are critical to demonstrate that a development intervention has actually contributed to change.

Regardless of the different measurement methodologies and techniques utilized to assess changes in the behavior, relationships, activities, or actions of individuals and organizations with whom a program works (such as results-based management or outcome mapping), it is important to have a baseline in order to determine with accuracy if significant and lasting changes have in fact occurred over time. For this reason, in this third issue of Co-Praxis, we identify, from our experience and from literature review, the importance of gathering baseline data, and we present a summary of good practices and key factors to consider. We hope this bulletin helps practitioners develop an understanding of the main concepts, elements, and most effective methods of conducting a baseline study to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of development programs.

Just Governance Group's Observations regarding Baselines

The Just Governance Group (JGG) has offered multidisciplinary services to international development agencies and public institutions that include strategic planning, design, monitoring, and evaluation of development projects. During these processes, JGG consultants have recognized that conducting baselines is a vital step that helps demonstrate the outcome and impact of projects and programs. However, JGG consultants have noted that most implementing agencies rarely carry out baselines. For example, after having conducted over 20 external evaluations in recent years, JGG evaluators have not had the benefit of measuring progress against comprehensive baseline data.

JGG consultants have also found, through their advisory work, that baseline information is not always used to refine the indicators and targets in a performance measurement framework. For example, a non-governmental organization (NGO) conducted baseline data collection six months after the logical framework and monitoring and evaluation plan had been completed with JGG assistance. The baseline data revealed important information, such as the fact that some of the targets set had already been surpassed, and that data was not available for all indicators. At this time it would have been important to review the logical framework and the performance measurement framework to adjust indicators and targets.

What is a Baseline?

In the literature reviewed, a baseline is defined as an analysis that defines the initial situation or condition that exists at the beginning of a development program. This analysis is used to assess the achievement of the outcomes and impact of a program. It gathers key information and provides a snapshot of an activity at a very early stage so that later judgments can be made about the quality and progress of this activity.

Key Documents Reviewed

Australian Agency for International Development. *AusGuideline Baseline Studies*. (2005)

Beath, Andrew, Christia, F and Enikolopov, R. *Randomized Impact Evaluation of Afghanistan's National Solidarity Programme: Baseline Survey Report*. (2008)

Church, Cheyanne and Rogers, M. *Designing for Results: Integrating Monitoring and Evaluation in Conflict Transformation Programs*. (2006) Search for Common Ground.

Oury, Dr. Diallo.M. *Methodological Guide to Conducting a Baseline Study*. (2005)

UN Women, *What is a Baseline Study?* (2008)

United Nations World Food Program, *Monitoring & Evaluation Guidelines, How to Plan a Baseline Study?* (No date)

Additional Resources

Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). *Baseline Information and its Role in Decision Making: The Case of Nepal*. (2003)

Ferguson, Dr. Alan, Omondi, Dr. A., and van den Homberg, H. *Baseline Survey: An Essential and Rapid Tool in the Planning and Evaluation of a Community Based Development Program*. (2004)

The World Bank Institute. *Reconstructing Baseline Data for Monitoring & Evaluation – Data Collection Methods*. (2007)

UNHCR. *Baseline Study: Documenting Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviours of Somali Refugees and the Status of Family Planning Services in UNHCR's Operations in Nairobi, Kenya*. (2011)

Why Conduct a Baseline?

- To determine the extent of certain behavior patterns in a specific population,
- To provide important demographic, political, and socio-economic information about the context where a policy, program, or project is being implemented,
- To determine, confirm and/or adjust indicators to ensure that measurement is feasible, and
- To form the basis for a 'before and after' assessment or a 'change over time' assessment.

Good Practices and Key Factors to Consider in the Development of Baselines

- Baselines should be conducted at a very early stage; preferably, after the program or policy has been designed, but prior to its implementation.
- Baselines should be developed at the same time as the goals and objectives of a project or policy are being designed. Baseline indicators will respond to the program's implementation strategies.
- Information should be collected based on indicators. Furthermore, those implementing the project should expect to adjust some of the indicators once baseline information is completed, as the data collected may help refine and/or complement the program's indicators.
- Baselines should provide a description of the location and geographical context of the study, and should describe the design of the tools, the sampling strategies, (including the sizes of the samples), and the methods used for gathering data. It is necessary to explain the use of the research specifications and the methods chosen as well as the problems encountered.
- The baseline data should be in accordance with the program's objectives and outcome indicators. The information that is being collected should assist program implementers in setting future targets: if you don't know where you are, how can you know where you are going?
- Program implementers should analyze the baseline data and use it as a tool to adjust the results framework and measurement instruments of the program.
- Baselines should not be confused with Institutional or Thematic Assessments. JGG consultants have noted that assessments are often confused with baselines. While both are usually conducted before a project is implemented, assessments are often undertaken before the project is designed and they do not identify the pre-operation conditions for outcome, nor the impact indicators that will establish the project's intended changes. Instead, assessments provide preliminary information on an issue and inform about plausible strategies for action. Baselines, on the other hand, generate important data that help to determine change and reform and/or complement the project (and project's indicators).

JGG Reflections on Baseline Studies

- Baselines should gather qualitative and quantitative data. JGG believes that gathering qualitative as well as quantitative data is of great importance, as it will help determine the change as well as the type of change that may be observed once the project is being implemented.
- Organizations should conduct baselines within the project management cycle. Baselines are a key aspect of the project implementation cycle. Unfortunately, they are not always included in the process because of budget, capacity and time constraints, or because of insufficient program planning and foresight. JGG recommends institutions conduct baseline data collection internally within their internal planning, monitoring and evaluation systems or unit, and when appropriate, seek the assistance of external evaluators to support the data collection.
- Baselines should be participative and inclusive. When conducting baselines, it is important to uncover the context, perceptions, and quality of, as well as opinions about, experiences or conditions in ways that include the participation of key stakeholders and actors. Conducting baselines in a participatory and inclusive manner is an opportunity to validate expected results and targets with beneficiary groups.
- Donor agencies should understand the importance of baselines, request them, and allocate funds to conduct them. When estimating the budget and allocating the funds for any development program, donor agencies as well as implementing organizations should consider and include the cost and time of baselines. In addition, it is advisable that donor agencies encourage organizations and public institutions to develop and strengthen internal monitoring and evaluation departments that can assist and lead this process.
- Baselines should not be perceived as a difficult task to complete. JGG consultants have noted that organizations often perceive baselines as an arduous task. This is based on the common misconception that baselines should incorporate detailed and extensive demographic and socio-economic data. Baseline information can be simply conducted by gathering concise information on each indicator previously identified in the logic model. Often a column entitled "baseline" is inserted in the performance measurement framework between the "indicator" and "target" columns. For this reason, JGG consultants recommend that organizations collect concrete and precise data that will facilitate efficient and effective measurement of progress toward results or outcomes.

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