



USAID Center for Development Information and Evaluation

BUILDING A RESULTS FRAMEWORK

What Is a Results Framework?

A *results framework* (RF) presents an operating unit's strategy for achieving a specific objective.* Typically, it is laid out in graphic form supplemented by narrative. An RF includes the objective and the intermediate results, whether funded by USAID or its partners, necessary to achieve it. The framework also conveys the development hypothesis implicit in the strategy and the cause-and-effect linkages between the intermediate results and the objective. It includes any critical assumptions that must hold for the development hypothesis to lead to achieving the relevant objective. In short, a person looking at a results framework should be able both to understand the premises underlying the strategy and to see within the framework those intermediate results critical to achieving the objective.

Figure 1 on page 6 gives an example of a results framework diagram.

What Functions Does a Results Framework Serve?

A results framework is both a *planning* and a *management tool*. The RF is central to the strategic plan and provides a program-level framework for managers to gauge progress toward the achievement of results and to adjust relevant programs and activities accordingly. In addition, the design of a results framework provides an important opportunity for an operating unit to work with its development partners and customers to *build consensus and ownership* around shared objectives and approaches to meeting those objectives. RFs also function as effective *communication tools* because they succinctly capture the key elements of a strategy for achieving an objective (i.e., program intent and content). Finally, as "living" management tools, RFs are the foundation for several critical programmatic events and processes:

The strategic planning process begins with building a results framework (RF). This *Tips* discusses key steps involved in developing an RF.

***Tips* contains no new Agency policy or essential procedures. Rather, the *Tips* series provides guidelines, advice, and suggestions to USAID managers on how to effectively plan and conduct performance monitoring and evaluation activities.**

*The objective may be a strategic objective, a strategic support objective, or a special objective (as defined in the Automated Directives System, 201.5, 10a, b, and c). While the ADS does not strictly require RFs for special objectives, operating units should consider developing an RF as a useful planning and management tool for special objectives. Reference to strategic objectives in this *Tips* should be understood to include strategic support objectives and special objectives.

- Reaching agreement both within the operating unit and between the operating unit and relevant USAID/ Washington bureaus on expected results and required resources
- Identifying and designing results packages
- Selecting appropriate indicators for each USAID-supported result and developing the operating unit's performance monitoring and evaluation systems*
- Using performance information to inform program management decisions (i.e., adjusting specific program activities)
- Analyzing and reporting on performance through the R4 process

A results framework should be kept current; that is, RFs should be revisited or revised when 1) results are not achieved as expected, 2) critical assumptions prove invalid, 3) the underlying development theory is wrong, or 4) critical policy, operational, or resource problems were not adequately recognized.

Steps in Designing a Results Framework

Key elements of an RF include the strategic objective, intermediate results, hypothesized cause-and-effect linkages, and critical assumptions. The process for identifying these elements is outlined below as a series of steps. These steps need not be followed sequentially: developing an RF is and should be an iterative process.

Operating units may use a variety of approaches to develop their respective results frameworks. Whichever process is followed, it is important to involve partners

“It is critical to stress the importance of not rushing to finalize a results framework. It is necessary to take time for the process to mature and to be truly participative.”

—USAID staff member in Africa

*The ADS requires that results not supported by USAID be monitored but does not dictate the specific approach SO teams should use to do so. Therefore, teams may decide to define indicators and collect related data, or they may choose a less “systematic” or “rigorous” monitoring approach (ADS 203.5.5.a and E203.5.5[d]2.)

(i.e., NGOs, other donors, and host government organizations sharing the objective) as well as nonmission USAID staff (i.e., Global Bureau, regional bureau, Management Bureau, and the Bureau for Policy and Program Coordination).[†] Although this takes time, the results framework will be more complete and representative with their participation. Moreover, broader ownership of the RF among partners may promote greater harmonization of program activities aimed at a shared objective.

Strategic objective teams should also keep in mind that the causality in the RF is “hypothesized.” It is hardly ever possible to prove the cause-and-effect relationships between results that are identified in an RF (nor is it necessary). Performance data for individual results will support or weaken the case for the proposed causal links evident in an RF, in turn pointing managers toward modifications that will lead to more useful, grounded, and realistic results frameworks.

Set an Appropriate Objective

The *strategic objective* (SO) is the center of any results framework. Defining an SO at an appropriate level of impact is one of the most critical and difficult tasks a team will face. It is a critical task because “the strategic objective forms the standard by which the operational unit is willing to be judged in terms of its performance” and is the basis for the management contract (ADS 201.5.10a). The task is difficult because an SO should reflect a balance of two somewhat conflicting considerations—ambition and accountability. A strategic objective should be “the most ambitious result (intended measurable change) . . . that a USAID operational unit, along with its partners, can materially affect and for which it is willing to be held responsible” (ADS 201.5.10a).

Identifying an appropriate level of ambition for an SO depends on factors both internal and external to the operating unit. Not only USAID’s activities and resources should be reflected, but also such factors as the host country environment, customers’ perspectives and needs, and the commitment and resources of USAID’s partners. In short, a strategic objective should reflect the

[†]For further information on involving partners in strategic planning and performance measurement activities, refer to ADS Supplemental Guidance, *Working With Partners in a Reengineered USAID*

operating unit's best assessment of what can realistically be achieved by USAID and its partners within a given time frame and set of resources. The strategic objective must, in the end, strike a balance between ambition and accountability.

Moreover, an SO should be consistent with the Agency's strategic plan. The Agency goal and objective to which the SO contributes should be identified in the results framework.

Identify the Intermediate Results

To achieve a longer term strategic objective, a set of "lower level" intermediate results must first be reached. An *intermediate result* is a discrete result or outcome thought to be necessary to achieve an objective or another intermediate result critical to achieving the objective.

After agreeing on the SO, the team—USAID and its partners—must identify the intermediate results necessary to achieve the SO. The team should assess relevant country and sector conditions and draw on development experience in other countries to better understand the changes that must occur if the SO is to be attained. The SO team should remember to include intermediate results that are supported by USAID partners when they are relevant and critical to achieving the SO.

Initially, the SO team might identify a large number of possible results relevant to the SO. As the team develops the RF, though, it will want to settle on a critical set of intermediate results necessary to achieve the objective. This number will vary with the scope and complexity of the SO. Eventually, the team should arrive at a final set of results that members believe is reasonable. This set of results will become the RF the team will submit in its strategic plan for approval.

An important element of this step is to identify USAID and partner responsibility for managing toward achieving each of the intermediate results that have been identified. Including this information is critical to the utility of a results framework as a planning and management tool. While it is frequently not feasible to include these responsibilities in the RF graphic, they can be discussed in the accompanying narrative.

Managers have found the criteria presented in box 1 to be important for developing high-quality strategic objectives and intermediate results.

Clarify the Causal Linkages Between Results

Once the team has identified the intermediate results that support an objective, it must clarify the principal causal connections that link the two. Consider the following when defining cause-and-effect linkages:

- Causal links may flow from one intermediate result to one or several others; that is, one intermediate result may contribute to the achievement of others.
- Cause-and-effect linkages usually move "up" a results framework; that is, intermediate results that have a lower level of impact most commonly support the achievement of intermediate results that have a higher level of impact. However, causal linkages may "move" in any direction in an RF, as long as they ultimately contribute to the achievement of the SO.
- Links may exist across the results frameworks for different SOs in an operating unit. For example, a result presented in the RF for one SO may also contribute to the achievement of results in the RF of a second SO. When important, these links should be presented in the relevant results framework.

While in many cases one could find many causal connections in an RF, teams should remember that the RF is a planning, management, and communication tool and, as such, should be clear and understandable.

Two important considerations for the SO team during this step are 1) ensuring that connections defined between results are causal rather than categorical or definitional (see box 2) and 2) understanding the expected time frame within which each result will be achieved and the effect of such a time frame on related causal linkages.

Identify Critical Assumptions

Next the team must identify the set of critical assumptions relevant to the achievement of the SO. A *critical*

Box 1. Criteria for Strategic Objectives and Intermediate Results

Use these criteria to guide the development of high-quality SOs and intermediate results:

Results statement. Each SO and intermediate result should express an outcome—in other words, the results of actions, not the actions or processes themselves. For example, the statement “improved economic policy environment” is a result, while the statement “increased promotion of market-oriented policies” is not.

Clear and measurable. Each SO and intermediate result should be stated clearly and precisely and in a way that can be objectively measured. For example, the statement “increased ability of entrepreneurs to respond to an improved policy, legal, and regulatory environment” is both ambiguous and subjective. How one defines or measures “ability to respond” to a changing policy environment is unclear and open to different interpretations. A more precise and measurable results statement in this case is “increased level of investment.” However, USAID often seeks results that are not easily quantified. In these cases, qualitative measures may be more appropriate (see discussion in *Tips #12* on quantitative versus qualitative indicators).

Unidimensional. An SO or intermediate result ideally consists of only one result. Unitary results statements help clarify management questions, improve the targeting of USAID resources, and permit a more straightforward assessment of performance than do multidimensional results. For example, the statement “healthier, better educated, higher income families” is an unacceptable multidimensional result because it includes diverse components that may not be well defined and may be difficult to manage and measure. In some cases, though, it may be appropriate for a result to contain more than one dimension when the components are linked and well defined (refer to ADS 201.5.10a).

Time frame. The time frame for an SO affects what is feasible for achievement—a longer time frame would allow for greater impact. Time frames for SOs in sustainable development programs are typically five to eight years, whereas for programs operating under short-term transitional circumstances or under conditions of uncertainty, the time frame may be shorter. The time frame for intermediate results need not be the full length of the time frame for the relevant SO. Intermediate results, which can become “active” midstream in a strategy or may be achieved or dropped after only two or three years, generally reflect a three- to five-year time frame. Also note that the time frames for the strategic objective and intermediate results provide the time boundaries for the activities undertaken to achieve the results.

assumption is a general condition under which the development hypothesis or strategy for achieving the objective will hold true. Critical assumptions are outside the control or influence of USAID and its partners (i.e., they are not results), but they reflect conditions likely to affect the achievement of results in the RF, such as the level of world prices or the openness of export markets.

SO teams should be realistic when identifying critical assumptions and avoid defining critical assumptions that have a comparatively low chance of holding over the duration of the strategy. For example, perhaps a critical assumption of adequate rainfall for a given region has historically held in only four of the past six years. The probability that this critical assumption will hold is relatively low; thus, retaining such a critical assumption poses a risk to the strategy.

In cases like this, the SO team should attempt to identify means to actively address the problem represented by the critical assumption. If the team is able to identify realistic means to address the problem (e.g., water storage or irrigation methods, or the use of drought-resistant seeds or farming techniques), then it can “capture the problem” as an intermediate result rather than as a critical assumption. Similarly, the team may decide to develop contingency plans for the years a drought occurs, while still managing with the strategic objective in mind within the context of the results framework. If it is not possible to develop an intermediate result that addresses a “low likelihood” critical assumption, and if contingency planning seems to be problematic or of little value, then the team may want to reconsider its strategy and accompanying results framework.

Box 2. Criteria for Defining Linkages

These criteria may guide the development of high-quality linkages:

Causality. The relationship between two intermediate results that are “linked,” or between an intermediate result and the SO, should be causal; that is, achievement of one result is necessary for, and contributes to, achievement of the other. The relationship between results should not be categorical or definitional; that is, “lower” level results should not merely describe component parts of a related “higher” level result. For example: A categorical relationship is represented by an SO, “increased biodiversity in critical ecosystems,” that is supported by two intermediate results—“increased biodiversity in marine ecosystems” and “increased biodiversity in forest ecosystems.” An intermediate result that is causally related to this SO would be, for example, “reduced population pressure on critical ecosystems.”

Direct. The causal connection between two results or between a result and an SO in a results framework should be direct. It should not be necessary to infer additional intermediate results to understand the linkage between two results. Similarly, it should not be necessary to accept many or broad assumptions to move from a “lower” result to a “higher” result or SO. For example, an intermediate result of “improved quality of training materials for health-care providers” does not have (and should not be presented as having) a direct link to an SO of “reduced fertility”; that is, improved training materials might lead to more qualified health providers, in turn leading to the availability of higher quality health-care and family-planning services, in turn leading to an increase in the demand for and use of such services, finally leading to the SO.

Complete the Results Framework

As a final step, the SO team should step back from the results framework and review it as a whole. The RF should be straightforward and understandable. Check that the results contained in the RF are measurable and feasible with anticipated USAID and partner resource levels.

Next Steps

During the development of the results framework, the SO team should also begin identifying performance measures and formulating activities required to achieve the intermediate results for which the operating unit is responsible. Next steps for the team include developing a complete set of performance indicators, establishing related baselines and targets, and developing a performance monitoring plan (refer to *Tips* #6, 7, and 8). During activity design, teams should identify the causal links between activities and results in the RF they support. Teams may find it helpful at this stage to add more detail to the RF to make the link between the activities (i.e., operational level) and the results (i.e., strategic level) more evident.

Results Framework Example

(See figure 1, next page).

Suggested Further Reading

Working With Partners in a Reengineered USAID, Supplemental Guidance to the ADS, 1999.

Tips are supplemental references to the reengineering automated directives (ADS, chapter 203). For more information on the *Tips* series, contact John Haecker, CDIE/PME, by phone (202) 712-5823, fax (202) 216-3124, or e-mail (jhaecker@usaid.gov). Copies of *Tips* can be ordered from the Development Experience Clearinghouse by calling (703) 351-4006 or by faxing (703) 351-4039. Please refer to the publication number. To order over the Internet, address requests to docorder@dec.cdie.org.

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Figure 1. Upper River Zone Results Framework

