Developing Measurable Outcomes

Why Identify and Measure Project Performance?

Performance measurement improves project management and effectiveness. By focusing on project outcomes, it can define success early, execute projects more likely to generate a significant impact to the specialty crop industry, and more easily measure and demonstrate results.

There are several driving forces behind the need to measure the performance of projects:

- The value of the Program in "enhancing the competitiveness of specialty crops" must be supported by the results of the funded projects.
- The project benefits to the specialty crop industry.
- Success of a program relies on focusing on quality outcomes and using metrics that matter.

Focusing on Outcomes

The value of any project cannot be measured without defining success. It requires focus on outcomes. Outcomes are the events, occurrences, or changes in conditions, behavior, or attitudes that indicate progress toward a project's goals. Outcomes are specific, measurable, and meaningful.

Outcomes are not activity-based, such as "conduct five training workshops" or "install a salad bar in 20 schools" or "develop a new pest testing protocol", These are outputs and do not reflect results achieved and will not demonstrate the value of the project; rather they are activities or products of work that support outcomes. Outputs are things that the project's personnel have done, not changes that favorably effect outside beneficiaries.

In order to develop outcomes, program personnel should ask what results are expected from each output. Outcomes should be something that the project wants either to maximize, such as evidence of "increased learning by workshop participants" or minimize, such as "reduce pest damage to fruit." Some outcomes are financial. For example, by installing salad bars in schools, a likely appropriate outcome is increasing the dollar amount of fruit and vegetable purchases. Theses intended results of the project generally are expressed as goals within your project outcome.

Outcomes are:

- *Changes* in behavior or condition that reflect a positive impact to the specialty crop industry. Note: outcomes generally begin with a verb like increase, expand, or improve.
- *Specific and measurable:* tracking data to monitor outcomes is practical and timely.
- *Meaningful* achieving an outcome indicates fulfillment of purpose and program toward long-term impact.

Outcomes are not:

- Activities or processes (hosting an event is an activity, increasing awareness is an outcome).
- Immeasurable long-term change.

Metrics that Matter

To ensure you measure what matters: 1) transition from measuring compliance only to also measuring compliance only to measuring value also; 2) measure contribution, not attribution; and 3) use metrics focusing on business and development outcomes, the value of the project, and effective implementation.

Compliance vs. Value

Measurement is often an act of compliance – counting up the work plan activities completed and monitoring how funds are spent. While ensuring that adequate progress is made on the project and funds are accounted for and expended responsibly is an important aspect of performance reporting, to demonstrate impact and value of a project requires another type of measurement. In short, awardees have a responsibility to track funds and activities; but they also have a responsibility to communicate value through outcome measurement.

An output-oriented measurement system asks, "Did it happen?" It tracks activities and dollars. Data is collected for transparency and rarely revisited. Outcome-oriented measurement attempts to prove theories of change, asking, "Did it work?" and "How well is it working?" it is a value-oriented approach that captures outcomes and progress toward long-term and systemic change and uses data to improve results and demonstrate value delivered.

Many applicants may aspire to demonstrate an explicit cause and effect relationship between their projects and broad social change to the specialty crop industry. In doing so, they are faced with two challenges. First, to scientifically validate that a project will produce a long-term impact requires studies that are costly and more time-intensive than is a practical for most projects. Second, most projects are complex and multi-variant in nature; attributing large scale or systematic change to a specific project is rarely possible.

The solution to this dilemma, project partners can practically measure their contribution to long-term impact by measuring their progress against intermediate outcomes. Intermediate outcomes occur before, and are expected to help lead to, long-term outcomes. For example, a project aiming to reduce childhood obesity is not likely to have the time and resources to statistically prove the relationship between the project and a decline in this serious health issue. It can however, measure the number of children who have increased access to healthy fruits and vegetables or an increase in dollars being spent on fruit and vegetable purchases. Similarly, a project that aims to train 500 specialty crop farmers in Good Agricultural Practices and Good Handling Practices cannot credibly correlate its project to decreasing food safety outbreaks. What it can measure as a result of the training is an increase in food safety knowledge of the trained farmers and resulting growth in access to new markets by measuring their increase in distribution outlets and/or sales.

Identifying Performance Measures, Benchmarks, and Targets

Once it is decided on the goal of the project's performance-

based outcome, you need to identify a measure, benchmark, and target. A performance measure is a particular value or characteristic used to measure an outcome. Performance measures are used to observe progress and to measure actual results compared to expected results. They are usually expressed in quantifiable terms and should be objective and measurable (numeric values, percentages, scores, indices). Quantitative indicators are preferred in most cases, although in certain circumstances qualitative indicators are more appropriate.

Performance measures should focus on metrics that:

- Represent results in terms of their contribution to project goals, not just those that track activities or inputs;

- Demonstrate incremental value in terms of effectiveness (increased relevance or quality), scale (increase in reach), efficiency (reduction in time and/or cost),

or sustainability (increase in longevity or impact); and

- Progress toward the project's intended purpose.

Next, determine the baseline for each measure and set target goals for future performance.

Benchmarks are usually determined by researching past circumstances in the area you are trying to measure. As an alternative, you may use benchmarks established by third parties accepted as the standard-setters in the industry. If data does not exist, describe the lack of data. It may be appropriate in the first year to set vaguer targets such as "improvement" where any increase represents outcome achievement, and set more concrete targets in subsequent years when benchmark data is available.

Once the baseline is determined, set targets for the quantity of change expected. Targets may be framed in terms of:

- Absolute level of achievement (ex: increase access of 10,000 students to

fruits and vegetables).

- Change in level of achievement (ex: increase the access of 10,000 students to fruits and vegetables, 5,000 more than last year); or

- Change in relation to the scale of the problem (ex: increase access of 10,000 students to fruits and vegetables, approximately 30% of the students in the city's school district)

Lastly, develop your data collection plan.

Define who the data sources are and how the data will be collected. If the project involves a survey, provide information about the nature of the questions that will be asked, the methodology to be used, and the population to be surveyed. If a draft questionnaire is available, you may want to include a copy with the application. Outline how data gathered will be used to correct deficiencies and improve performance. This data

collection plan should be integrated into your work plan and budget.

Examples of Outcome Measure

Goal – Increase the number of low income people in X County who have access to fruits and vegetables.

Performance Measure - Number of people who actively participate in the community garden program.

Benchmark - In 2011, 100 people participated in the community garden program from May through September.

Target – In 2012, increase the participation by 50% to 200 people during the same period.

Data Collection Plan – Promotion for the program will start in January. Each month from January through April, enrollment records will be reviewed to ensure that participation is increasing. If this is not the case, changes to the program promotion plan will be made at the beginning of the month.

Metric Examples:

Contribution-Oriented Metric:

➢ % change in knowledge

➢ % increase in fruit and vegetable consumption

Compliance-Oriented Metric Focused on Activities:

➢ # of trainings

➢ # of salad bars installed