Aggregation & Synthesis Report 2019

Summary of a Dialogue

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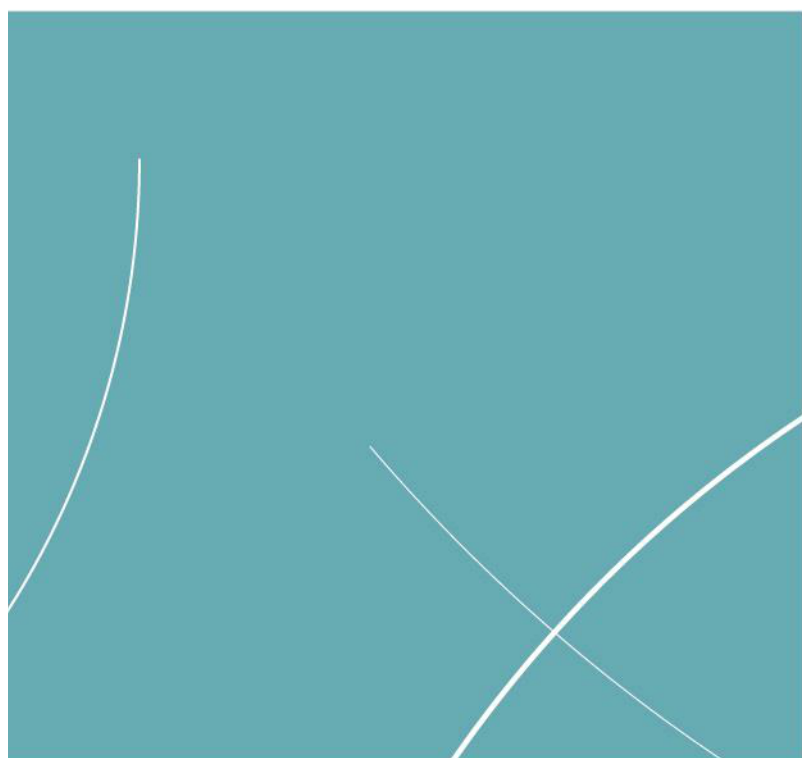
Background

Earlier this year, in the spring of 2019, the Department for Stabilisation and Humanitarian Aid (DSH) started revising the indicators underlying its Results Framework (RF). Around the same time, several implementing partners approached DSH with questions about the synthesis of reports, i.e., the exercise by which DSH brings together and selects insights from reports produced by implementing partners to then be presented to parliament and society more broadly.

Against this background, DSH invited its implementing partners for a dialogue on indicators, synthesis and reporting. Through the dialogue, DSH aimed at soliciting feedback and learn from practices by implementing partners. But DSH also wanted to use the opportunity for an exchange of thoughts among implementing partners. The Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law (KPSRL) coordinated the dialogue. It divided implementing partners in two groups, and organized two parallel sessions – one on indicators, another on synthesis – and a third joint discussion regarding next steps. Around the same time, KPSRL also coordinated meetings with implementing partners on the alignment between SDG16 and the DSH Results Framework.

This report offers a summary of observations made by implementing partners and DSH during the sessions on indicators, synthesis and reporting. In addition to an outline of insights on these topics, this document also summarizes observations on two other issues that emerged during the dialogue and importantly contributed to it: the identification of outcomes from programs and projects; and, learning.

A final note on the treatment of observations by implementing partners is asked for. The observations often varied across participants on particular issues. In light of the larger objectives of the sessions, that was not considered problematic. Instead, the variation was welcomed. It allows DSH to consider different perspectives on several issues and thereby make even more informed decisions.

On Indicators

The dialogue started with a consideration of indicators that are relevant to the work of implementing partners but that were missing from the Results Framework.

Missing Indicators

For the Human Security pillar, several partners explained that the Results Framework (RF) seems to be guided by a top-down perspective by which the state is put center stage. As a result, they perceived less attention to non-state local-level security providers and mentioned that relations among (ethnic) groups are marginalized in the RF.

Furthermore, partners explained that the question of legitimacy is absent from the Human Security Pillar. They also mentioned that indicators mostly focus on outcome – less on output – and do not account for behavioral change of security providers. Finally, the role of finance and the ability of local and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to open bank accounts and transfer money is according to one of the partners fundamental for the functioning of NGOs but overlooked in the RF.

For the Rule of Law pillar, partners explained that outcome indicators primarily focus on the perspective of beneficiaries – mostly, qualitative indicators (or definitions, Box 1). Achievements such as the number of

cases processed are not included. Both for the Rule of Law pillar and the Political Governance & Peace Processes pillar (PGPP), partners pointed out that there are no indicators related to the influencing of (international) policy. Trust between politicians, while fundamental according to one of the partners, is also not captured in the indicators in the PGPP pillar. And more in general, within the PGPP pillar, there are a number of outputs and outcomes for which there are no indicators.

Finally, some of the partners mentioned that "more informed (evidence-based) policy" was an explicit cross-cutting goal in the RF. But there are no indicators on knowledge and the production of new insights relevant to more informed evidence-based policy.

Box 1. What are Indicators?

The following definition of indicators was used during the sessions. Indicators are measures used to numerically capture output and outcome. Indicators can have a qualitative or quantitative character. Qualitative indicators are measures that capture perceptions, beliefs, emotions or attitudes such as one's feeling of safety or perceived access to justice. These properties are not numerical in nature but can be subjected to indices and translated into numbers. Quantitative indicators are measures with a more objective character, e.g., the number of policemen or judges in a village.

Reference Sheets

Following a consideration of missing indicators, a discussion emerged about challenges related to the use of indicators. Many partners explained that indicators can be interpreted in different ways. To ensure consistency, they requested reference sheets or methodological notes explaining how DSH interprets indicators, what should be included and what not.

Challenges

A deeper question regarded the usefulness, feasibility, and desirability of reporting on indicators, especially outcome indicators. A considerable part of the first parallel sessions revolved around that question.

As for *feasibility*, some explained that the capacity – time and ability – for data collection and reporting on strict indicators is limited in certain organizations. This problem is compounded for organizations working with different donors. Furthermore, participants argued that projects vary greatly and do not allow for easy comparison.

According to some, such comparison is also not very *useful* because of the need for abstraction. Why not? When outcomes from different projects must be subsumed under the same set of indicators, then indicators need to be more flexible, comprehensive and generic in nature. Participants argued that these kinds of indicators are not always meaningful, and do not allow people to genuinely understand which outcomes have been realized.

A related issue regards the *desirability* of reporting on outcome indicators. Given constraints on feasibility and usefulness, some wondered if reporting on outcome indicators is desirable. Two issues added to the pertinence of that question: (a) the fact that parliament does not explicitly demand reporting on outcome indicators; and, (b) the threat of rigidness in programming – with program officers focusing on very particular outcomes and forgetting the bigger picture.

Reporting on Outcome?

Based on the challenges of reporting on outcome, some suggested that it was best for DSH to *only* report on output indicators. Others disagreed, observing that an exclusive focus on output indicators prevents organizations from showcasing the relevance of their work. These partners mentioned that a focus on output indicators could also lead members of parliament to raise questions about value-for-money and engage in interpretation of (ir)relevance themselves.

On Synthesis

The synthesis of reports was the main topic of the second set of sessions. DSH annually receives reports from implementing partners. These reports must be synthesized for presentation to parliament. Oftentimes, reports from implementing partners are products of synthesis themselves (see Image 1). In trying to learn from participants, DSH asked implementing partners about their synthesis practices.

Overview Indicators

Most implementing partners start synthesis with an overview of scores on output and/or outcome indicators. This

overview is then used for two main purposes:

i. Identification of (unobserved) patterns such as the distribution of outputs and outcomes across topics or geographical areas;
ii. Demonstration of achievements and relevance by showing how all interventions (outputs) contributed to all outcomes.

Variation in Synthesis

The result of the synthesis exercise varies across organizations. Some participants explained that their synthesis takes the form of summaries. These participants argued that their projects and programs are too diverse for meaningful comparison. Other participants offer numerical overviews of outputs and/or outcomes that are subsequently reflected upon as a whole.

In some cases, that reflection focuses on *both* outputs and outcomes; in others, synthesis concentrates mostly or exclusively on outputs. When the latter occurs – synthesis focusing on outputs – organizations typically select 'stories' form particular projects or programs to *illustrate* the overall relevance of their work.

Stories

In selecting those 'stories', some organizations engage in a collective discussion in which organizational members jointly decide which criteria should be used in the selection of stories. Some participants considered a focus on 'stories' risky. They argued that it could lead members of parliament and others to underestimate the relevance of their work. Other participants retorted that 'stories' are powerful as they appeal to

peoples' imaginations. In addition, they explained that the risk of underrating can be averted by (a) *explicitly* clarifying in reports that stories are *not* a summary of achievements, and (b) referring to program overviews or financial accounting for the bigger picture. Furthermore, these partners explained that reporting occurs for different audience with divergent attitudes and demands, and that reports can be tailored accordingly.

Discoveries

One of the implementing partners wondered whether synthesis exercises should not focus more on *discoveries*. This participant observed a tendency of organizations to list outputs and outcomes but not present connections between these as they are found at the program level. The participant pointed

out that these connections or discoveries are important from a learning perspective (see also below).

Dialogue

A recurring suggestion from participants was for DSH and implementing partners to engage in more dialogue about reports delivered to DSH. Dialogue would, according to participants, help DSH better make sense of organizational results, *and* contribute to learning, both by DSH and its implementing partners.

REPORTING SCHEME

Image 1. Reporting scheme from the perspective of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In some cases, reporting occurs directly from programs to the MFA without a need for synthesis. But in many cases, multiple projects or programs are synthesized at the organizational level before they reach the MFA. The MFA in turn synthesizes information for presentation to parliament.

On **Negative** Outcomes

Effective reporting partly hinges on the identification of outcomes, as indicators or otherwise, where outcomes are defined as *effects of interventions*. But what are project and program outcomes? And more specifically, what are *negative* outcomes? The latter are especially relevant for learning and Outcome Harvesting.

Definition

The dialogue showed that the definition of *negative* outcomes varied. Some implementing partners consider these as the *absence* of positive outcomes. Others define negative outcomes as *harm* caused by an intervention.[1]

Identification

The actual identification of (negative) outcomes also differed across organizations. Some organizations search and report *all* possible effects (see Box 2). Others, according to participants, tend to only report negative effects or the absence of positive effects *when these are attributable to context*, i.e., not when these are attributable to the design or implementation of an intervention.

Hesitation

Two reasons were presented for this tendency: (a) at the program level, people sometimes hesitate reporting negative effects or an absence of positive effects as a result of the design of programs or the implementation thereof, meaning that M&E officers then

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[1] One of the participants also mentioned that many interventions disturb the status quo in a way that is anticipated – undermining the power of

do not receive this kind of information;

(b) at the organizational level, M&E officers sometimes perceive a tension between accountability and learning, and are therefore also *less* inclined to report negative effects or an absence of positive effects that is attributable to the program or the organization.

Box 2. Different *types* of outcomes

Interventions can produce different types of outcomes, where outcomes are defined as effects of interventions. One way to classify these outcomes is to distinguish between (i) positive versus negative effects, with neither positive nor negative in the middle, and (ii) main effects versus side effects, where main effects regard effects of an intervention on the societal challenge or problem that it is aiming at (e.g., access to justice), and where side effects are effects of an intervention on the wider context. These effects are ideal-types and should be considered on a scale or continuum.

On Learning

DSH aims to stimulate learning and therefore invited implementing partners to enter into a discussion about indicators that focus on learning. Some participants argued that indicators cannot in themselves bring about learning. Others suggested that indicators could however stimulate learning. These participants for instance proposed reporting on (a) changes in Impact Pathways or Theories of Change (ToC) as proof of learning, or (b) activities undertaken with respect to learning.

Overall, it seemed that organizations differed in terms of learning policy and

certain actors – but are *not* considered to be problematic. Those outcomes are typically not listed as negative outcomes.

practice. Some organizations appear to exclusively focus on the *identification* of relations between output and outcome. Others also have policies and practices in place for *sharing* insights and lessons learned. Still others *document* insights internally. And some small set of implementing partners also *use* lessons learned to engage in programmatic change, i.e., changing plans and

interventions in one country based on lessons learned in another.

Moving from identification of insights to the documentation and use thereof insights can be challenging. Some partners pointed out that documentation for instance puts a burden on program staff without that staff immediately reaping the benefits of it.

Next Steps

The dialogue ended with a summary of next steps by DSH as it continues its process of updating indicators and reflecting on synthesis. DSH colleagues explained that they will further discuss RF indicators with staff members from Dutch embassies in December of this year. DSH is also exploring ways to better measure 'policy influencing'. Furthermore, DSH welcomes further suggestions from implementing partners related to indicators and the Results Framework more broadly. In the meantime, DSH will start developing methodological notes for these indicators, and would appreciate input on these from implementing partners. But DSH colleagues also explained that, at this stage, they will mainly focus on indicators – not the RF as a whole. Far-reaching changes in the RF as a whole could hurt ongoing projects and contribute to a sense of capriciousness given the fact that the Results Framework already changed quite recently. The Department for Stabilisation and Humanitarian Aid (DSH) aims to have a final version of its indicators ready by January 2020.