

Indicators

Now that you know the importance of evaluation, how do you actually go about evaluating your success? Successful groups go into a project with a clear vision of what they want to accomplish, how to measure it and how to communicate the results to people outside of the group. They have a good idea about what things are going to be affected and they know what needs to be measured so that everyone will understand the results. They also recognize the importance of linking their indicators to the goals they have set out to accomplish. A successful group does all of this by choosing appropriate indicators and regularly collecting information on those indicators.



What is an Indicator?

An indicator is a tool that helps you and your organization know how far your project is from achieving your goals and whether you are headed in the right direction. Choosing the right indicator is essential for effectively evaluating your progress. The right indicator should:

1. Be relevant to the project
2. Be easily understandable to everyone interested in your project
3. Be easily measured
4. Provide reliable information

Four Qualities of a Good Indicator:

1. Relevant

An indicator should be related to the objectives of the project and show how the project is helping your group to reach its goals. It should be something that the project will affect. For example, let's say the goal of your group is to improve stream water quality. The objectives related to this goal could be to reduce the number of failing septic systems in the watershed and increase education about the impact of bacteria contamination on the health of the stream. If you wanted to know if your group's septic tank program was having an effect, good indicators could be the number of septic tank pump-outs, the number of households connecting to a centralized sewer system and the number of people attending educational programs about water quality.

These indicators are relevant because they are related to your objectives to reduce the number of failing septic tanks and increase education. Keep in mind that while indicators should be used throughout the life of your project, you should also be aware of other factors that may have an effect on your indicators. For example, seasonal use of riverside cabins for recreation could influence the effect of individual septic tanks on the stream. Being aware of outside factors will help you to understand how appropriate an indicator is for measuring your progress toward reaching your objectives.

2. Understandable

A good indicator is one that everyone can understand. People should be able to relate it to some common knowledge or personal experience. Using the septic tank pump-out example, which is easier for people to understand? The number of failing tanks pumped in a year compared to the last 5 years or the percent reduction in total untreated wastewater volume discharged into the stream over the past 5 years? It would be easier for most people to visualize and understand if you told them that 172 tanks were pumped instead of saying that there was a 38 percent decrease of the gallons of wastewater discharged into the stream. However, you could also use both numbers to convey the total amount and the increase over time if it is understandable to your group members, partners and funders. Keep in mind that the indicator you use should mean something to your group and community. When you want (or need to) prove that a project is successful, you need to have an indicator that people can relate to.

3. Measurable

What good is an indicator if you can't measure it or if you spend all of your time measuring and lose your focus on the actual project? You don't want people spending all their time collecting indicator data instead of working on the project. An indicator should be easy to collect, measure and record. Effective indicators are based on data that is easy to access or that can be measured directly at the site. Knowing where to access data is important. Your local department of health, county courthouse, town hall and environmental agencies are some examples of where you can go to get good usable data. When collecting data in the field, volunteers really don't mind doing a quick and easy measurement. Ask them to spend a great deal of time collecting and processing data and you may not get a good response. Again, the best measure depends on the history, expertise and interests of people in your community.

4. Dependable

Effective indicators give you information you can trust. You want to be certain that the indicator is telling you the right thing. The number of tickets sold for a local event each year is an example of a dependable indicator. To determine if your event drew a larger crowd this year, you count the number of tickets and compare it to previous totals. Other indicators, like the number of cars or total receipts from the vendors, may not reliably show the number of people attending an event.

Types of Indicators

Groups form for a variety of reasons. Some groups want to improve the environment, others want to improve the economy and many want to improve the quality of life within the community. Some concentrate on just one goal, while others have many. Whatever your group's goal or goals may be, it is important to choose indicators that are related to the goals of your project. Indicators come in all shapes and sizes. However, for community based environmental projects, environmental, economic and social indicators are three frequently used categories. For individual groups, it may also be important to think about organizational indicators. Consequently, this manual focuses on these four categories.

<p style="text-align: center;">Indicators for Community Based Environmental Projects</p>

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Environmental✓ Economic✓ Social✓ Organizational |
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Environmental Indicators

Environmental indicators deal with the quality of the environment or with your area's natural resources. They will help you answer the question, "Are our activities helping to improve the environment?" They should target specific environmental concerns that affect your community. These indicators may require some technical knowledge, but many are simple enough to do on your own.

Examples of environmental indicators include:

- Measures of ecological health (biodiversity, percent native species, etc.)
- Basic water quality measurements (pH, dissolved oxygen, etc.)
- Number of complaints about air quality
- Number of septic tank pump-outs

Economic Indicators

Economic indicators allow an organization to track the health and growth of the local economy. They will help you answer the question, "How are our efforts affecting the economy of our community?" Economic indicators should focus on small, easily

measured parts of the economy. The indicators should also provide a glimpse into the condition of the regional economy.

Examples of economic indicators that are connected to the environment include:

- Percent of tourism dollars that come from outdoor recreational uses
- Number of new businesses that are more environmentally-friendly
- Number of people employed in outdoor recreational businesses (river guides, sporting goods stores, etc.)
- “Environmentally-efficient” agriculture (e.g. number of acres used for organic farming)

Social Indicators

Social indicators deal with issues like the health, safety, well-being and education of the community. Social indicators help you answer the question, “Do our actions help improve the quality of life of people in the community?” Social indicators can help you figure out if your group’s actions are having a positive effect on people’s lives.

Examples of social indicators that are connected to the environment include:

- Number of health problems related to environmental pollutants
- Number of students enrolled in an environmental education class
- Number of people utilizing community open space (parks, greenways, bike paths, etc.)
- Number of community members working on environmental issues

Organizational Indicators

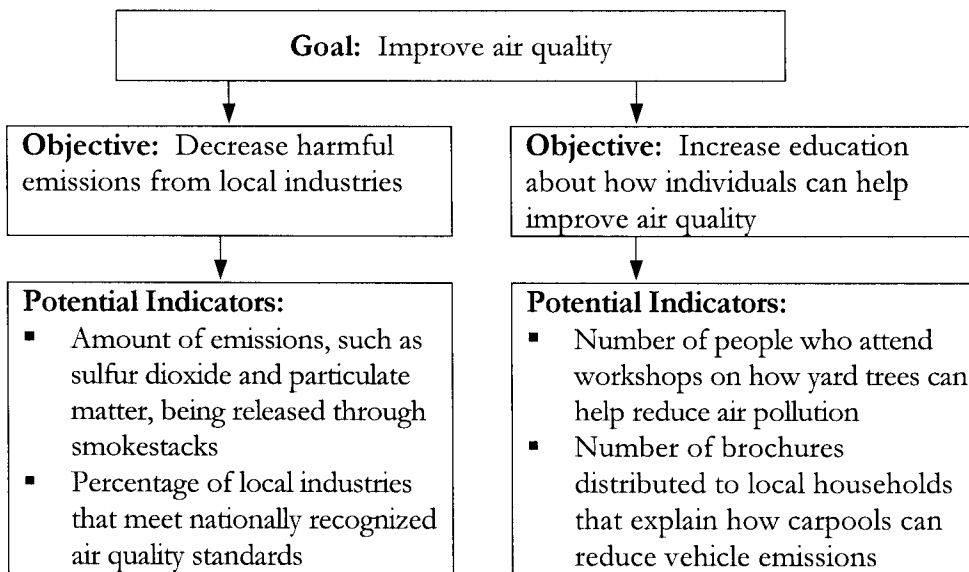
Organizational indicators can provide information on the health and vitality of your organization. They answer the question, “How are we doing as an organization?” An organization is able to track its own growth and progress by looking at certain small parts of its overall operation. This can greatly improve planning and management.

Examples of organizational indicators include:

- Annual changes in group membership
- Number of completed projects per year
- Amount of funding received per year

Choosing the Right Indicators

Choosing appropriate and effective indicators may seem complicated, but it isn't really that difficult. Just remember that your indicators should be related to the objectives of your project and that your objectives should be related to your group's goals. The diagram below illustrates the relationship between goals, objectives and indicators. Your group may have multiple goals. Each goal may have many objectives and there may be many indicators to measure your progress toward achieving these objectives.



No project operates in a vacuum and your projects will always have impacts outside of their intended goals. However, a laundry list of indicators is not the answer. A carefully selected set of indicators can save time and resources because you will only collect information that truly reflects the overall impact of your group's activities.

Once you have chosen appropriate indicators for your project, then it is time to go out and measure them. Its time to show yourself and the world that what your group is doing makes a positive difference in your community. By measuring your progress with well-chosen indicators, your group will see actual results. This may help build confidence and inspire you and your group to do more that you thought possible!