

The Project Cycle

Learning is the key to good projects. Good managers learn both from their own experience and from other people. They will build on what appears to be working well and change what is not. It is said, “insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.” This certainly applies to relief and development projects. How can we make sure that learning is an integral part of project planning and implementation? The project cycle is one helpful tool.

The project cycle is a map of the process of designing, implementing, and evaluating a project. Note that it is a “cycle”. We rarely get everything right the first time we do something. However, we can learn from our actions; ask a young child who has just snatched a burning stick from the fire! Or think of a farmer wanting to improve his maize harvest. He may try a number of different things – adding fertilizer, trying a different variety of maize, or perhaps irrigation. Whenever he tries something new, he will ask whether the maize harvest actually improved. Over time, he will learn what works best in his particular field.

The project cycle maps the relationship between doing (**action**), observing the results (**evaluation**), learning from what we have seen (**reflection**), and then applying those lessons to future actions (**planning**). Let’s look at these steps in a bit more detail.

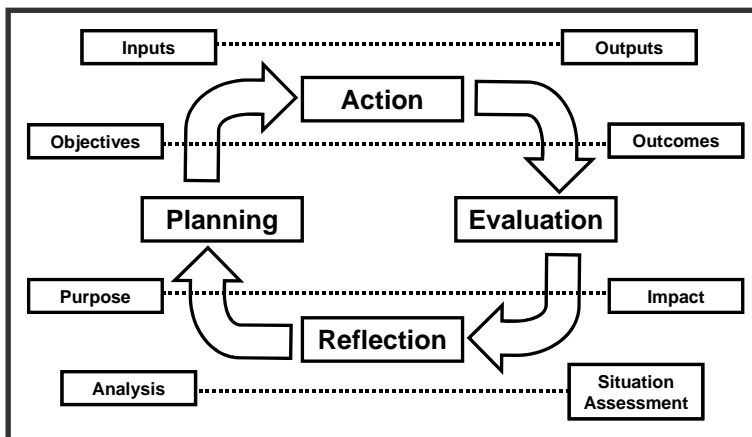
1. Reflection

Before getting down to detailed project planning, it is important to do some reflection. What is the current situation in the community? Who is affected and how? A **situation assessment** involves collecting information to answer these questions. Tools for conducting a food security assessment include the FEWS matrix (tips 302) and Household Economy Analysis (tips 301). Using information from the assessment, project planners do an **analysis** of the key factors affecting the population – describing the links between causes and effects and identifying areas where the project might realistically be able to intervene. The problem tree (tips 103) is a tool that is commonly used in analysis.

2. Planning

Once we have identified the key challenges facing the community and have a better understanding of the current situation, it is time to move into planning the project. First, it will be necessary to focus the project on a particular issue raised in the analysis. What we aim to do about this general issue becomes the **purpose** of the project. The purpose can be fairly general, and may not be achieved by this project alone. For example, we may aim to “Increase drought-affected farm families’ access to food.” This purpose is related to a broader development goal – sustainable access to food – to which we hope this project will contribute.

Once we know the purpose of a project, we can define more specific **objectives** that the project will achieve by the time it is completed. These objectives will be **Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound**. (For more on SMART objectives, see tips 104.) Our project’s objectives could include: “Increase beneficiary household maize yield by 20% after the first year”, “Decrease migration of men in search of work by 50% after six months”, and “Decrease distress sales of livestock by 70% by the end of the project”.



Before moving into the action phase, we still need to define what we will actually do. One way to do this is to identify the specific **outputs** that will lead to the **outcomes** that we named as our **objectives**. Outputs are the *direct* results of activities. For example: “20 km of irrigation canal de-silted”, “100 ha of land terraced”, or “2,000 seedlings planted”. In the planning phase, we identify the expected outputs that will lead to the expected outcomes (related to our objectives). The expected outputs help us to define the planned **activities**. In order to carry out these activities, we will need certain **inputs** (25 mt of maize seed, 2,000 hoes, resources for training sessions, etc.).

Once the planning phase is complete, we should have a clear picture of how the required **inputs** will be used in the planned **activities** to achieve the expected **outputs** that will lead to the desired **outcomes** (related to our **objectives**) that will contribute to the overall **impact** of the project (related to the **purpose**).

3. Action

Once plans are in place, and the inputs are available, the project activities can begin. Even while the project activities are underway, the project cycle continues to turn. Good managers will continually **monitor** the activities to make sure things are going according to plan and to modify any activities that are not functioning properly or are no longer appropriate. Feedback from field staff, observations, and project records all provide relatively rapid information on how the activities are progressing.

4. Evaluation

At the planning stage, we already identified the outputs, outcomes, and impact that the project was expected to achieve or contribute to. Thus, evaluation should never be just an “add-on” at the end of a project. Rather, it is an integral part of the project cycle.

Evaluations generally begin at the start of a project, with the collection of **baseline** information. Baseline information gives us a “snapshot” of important information (related to the expected results) before the project activities begin. Later, we can collect **follow-up** information and compare it with the baseline to see how much things have changed. If we want to measure whether distress sales have actually decreased by 70%, we need to know how many distress sales were taking place at the outset of the project and compare this with the number of sales taking place at the end of the project.

Often, organizations will conduct mid-term evaluations. This allows managers to respond if the activities do not appear to be achieving the expected results, rather than waiting until the end of the project to find out that it failed to achieve the intended results.

5. Reflection (again)

Once information has been collected in the evaluation phase, it is time to reflect on what we have learned. Taking lessons learned from the evaluation and information from any other available sources (experiences of other organizations, academic studies, tradition, etc.) we can make decisions to strengthen what works and change what does not. This feeds into the next cycle of planning, action, and evaluation.

One of the challenges facing local organizations is the enormous pressure they face from outside donor agencies that often dictate the terms of evaluation, based on their own needs (usually accountability to their own constituencies – governments or supporters). The need for accountability is real and important. However, if accountability is the sole focus of evaluation, and all of the information collected is simply sent off to outside agencies, the project cycle is broken. Too often, local organizations are engaged in results-based *measurement* (collecting information on the effectiveness of their activities) but not results-based *management* (actually using this information to strengthen and improve their own projects). It is up to local organizations to define the information they need to keep the project cycle going. It is up to donor agencies to strengthen and not break the local cycle of learning.

Hopefully, a mutual respect for the integrity of the project cycle will allow local and external agencies to work and learn together, in the interest of quality projects.

Resources

For more information on the project cycle, or other issues related to planning, monitoring, and evaluation, contact the Canadian Foodgrains Bank (crgb@foodgrainsbank.ca).