MEL Tip Sheet: Baselines

The methodology and results of the baseline study should be documented in a Baseline Study Report, which is a Minimum Standard for Program Management at Mercy Corps.

Introduction to baselines

A baseline is an M&E activity that should be undertaken at the beginning of every project. Its purpose is to collect key information that we need to track to measure any changes realized during the life of a project. This is especially relevant for high-level indicators, since they often require in-depth data collection activities, such as surveys or focus groups. This tip sheet covers important factors to consider when conducting baselines.

Successful baselines involve:

Simple, strategic data collection
A clear purpose and objectives
Good planning (scope of work)
Separation of baselines from assessments
Open to follow-on measurements if project activities or target groups change.

Why should I conduct a baseline?

Without a baseline, it is very difficult to demonstrate the effects, or impacts, of our interventions. A solid baseline study provides the basis by which results can be measured at the end of the program. Without a baseline we may be able to show outputs, such as the number of microfinance loans disbursed or health clinics rehabilitated, but we will be challenged to demonstrate the changes to which these actions have contributed. Baselines are especially important for outcome indicators that measure objectives and entail changes in knowledge, attitudes, behaviors and conditions.

Outcome-level indicators usually encompass changes in *knowledge, attitudes, behaviors* or *conditions*. For example, a microfinance project may wish to show increases in income, while a health project may contribute to increasing the percentage of mothers attending pre-natal consultations. The best way to demonstrate that these changes are taking place is to measure the indicators before the intervention and compare them to measurements at the mid-point or end of the project. Baselines also help us to refine our indicators and implementation strategy, and engage with the communities where we work.

For these reasons, conducting a baseline study is a Minimum Standard for Program Management at Mercy Corps, as well as a key step to effective M&E. Note that the methodology and results of the baseline study should also be documented in a Baseline Study Report, which is also a Minimum Standard for Program Management at Mercy Corps.

What is the difference between baselines and assessments?

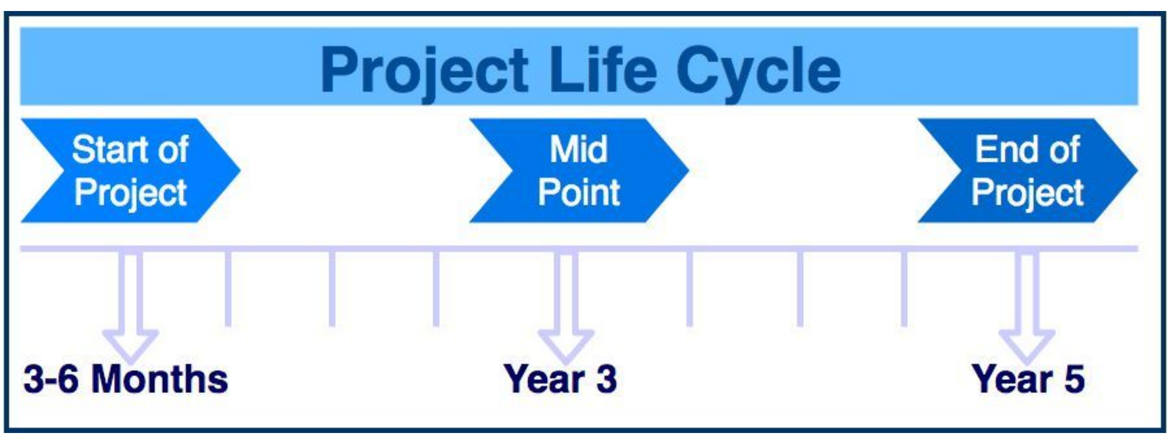
We sometimes confuse baselines with needs assessments, or believe that one can substitute for another. However, these activities differ in important ways, as illustrated below:

	Assessments	Baselines
Purpose	Explore issues with populations to inform project design	Collect data on the indicators chosen in our project design
Timing	Before project design or during start-up to finalize the workplan	After project design, prior to implementation of project activities
Target group	Wider population or broad sub-groups	Greater focus on planned project participants or beneficiaries
Data collection	Generally more qualitative, focusing on a range of issues	Generally more quantitative, focusing only on key indicators

Difficulties arise when we attempt to combine the vastly different functions of a baseline and an assessment. This happens often, usually because the initial assessment is out of date or lacking in detail, and we are seeking more information to tailor our implementation strategy.

When should I implement a baseline?

Baselines should be implemented after a proposal has been funded but before full-scale implementation begins. Baseline data should be collected on indicators before the activities relevant to those indicators have begun, and thus baselines are usually conducted in the early part of the Program Implementation phase. Sometimes a phased approach is appropriate, with different waves of baseline data collection for specific target groups prior to the start of their activities. This concept is illustrated below:



*If the project is initiating new activities or target groups at different points in the project cycle, we should be flexible to smaller, more dynamic baseline and evaluation measurements throughout the life of the project.
**Mid-term evaluation usually only necessary for projects of two years or more.

Recommendations for the exact timing of the baseline vary. Sometimes it is best to implement the baseline right away, in the first month. This often happens when we have a fairly straight-forward start-up process and a clear understanding of our informational needs.

In other cases, however, projects take longer to get off the ground. This can be the case when there are significant recruiting needs, when we are new to an area or sector, or when we still need to do an assessment during start-up to finalize the detailed implementation plans. In these instances, it may be preferable to wait a few months, when the project is more organized, in order to make sure the baseline covers all of the information we need to track. We should also be open to follow-on baseline measurements as needed, when new activities are introduced or strategic priorities shift. The timing of baselines may also have to shift according to seasonal factors, particularly for agricultural or economic development projects, to ensure that the most appropriate and relevant data is collected.

Remember also that baseline data may come in many different forms and from various sources, depending on the indicators. This includes monitoring data, secondary information, or smaller surveys targeting particular segments of the population or for a particular set of indicators. It may not necessarily require a large, comprehensive survey. The important point is that we have usable baseline data directly relevant to our indicators.

What if I do not have the time or resources for a baseline?

Simplify by reducing the scope of the baseline. Even in the most difficult of circumstances, such as in conflict environments or emergencies, responsible programming means tracking the effects of our interventions. There are ways to do this in reduced form when the situation dictates, by scaling down the amount of information collected and reducing the level of sophistication. When access is limited, remote third-party data collection or a phased approach may be possible. We can also talk to donors about the importance of baseline data and advocate for more time. The key is that we do not put off or cancel the baseline, but rather that we simplify and adapt it to make it feasible

Ways to make a baseline feasible:

- Reduce the data collected, focusing only on the most important indicator(s).
- Reduce the sample size.
- Take a phased approach, conducting follow-on measurements as required.
- Simplify the tools: use shorter questionnaires or fewer methods.

DO NOT eliminate the baseline due to time or resource pressures – instead, simplify!

How should I organize the baseline?

A scope of work for a baseline should include:

- Purpose or objectives
- Key baseline questions, tied to project indicators
- Team composition and roles
- Data collection methods
- Data management plan
- Budget and equipment needs
- Workplan with timeline
- Analysis and dissemination plan

A baseline is just like an evaluation in terms of how we plan for it. Developing a good scope of work is essential (see the *Baseline/Evaluation Scope of Work Template and Sample* on the Digital Library). Start with the *project logframe* to see which indicators we need to measure. We will be measuring high-level indicators in a baseline study (outcome/objective and goal/impact). This will help us to determine the objectives of our baseline. We should be careful to separate out the different methods that may be used to accomplish different objectives or measure certain indicators. For example, individual surveys may be best at obtaining the percentages or averages we need for our objective-level indicators, while focus groups may be an appropriate technique for exploring key qualitative indicators.

A baseline scope of work can be developed during the project's kick-off workshop. Integrating DM&E planning into the project kick-off workshop is highly recommended and important to develop team consensus on the project's objectives and activities, as well as planning M&E tasks and defining roles and responsibilities. The workshop should ideally be held when all staff are on board and prior to the implementation of project activities. See Mercy Corps' *DM&E Tip Sheet #7: DM&E at Project Kick-off* for more guidance.

After sufficient planning through a scope of work, we can start to develop the tools needed for the baseline. Remember to pilot test the tools extensively, to ensure standardization in filling them out and minimize mistakes or misunderstandings. Data entry and management processes, as well as a plan for analyzing the data, should also be worked out.

We also might want to consider bringing in outside expertise to assist with the baseline. External consultants can provide objectivity and a higher level of rigor. The disadvantage is that results may be less likely to be internalized by the project team, if the baseline is not conducted in a participatory manner. Baselines should be taken seriously and funded sufficiently, on par with evaluations, to ensure we have quality data upon which to measure impact over time.

What are the key factors to consider in a baseline?

Planning for consistency and replicability. The key to effective baselines is the ability to compare the data collected to similar information gathered at the end of the project. This requires thinking through the methods used to ensure they will still be appropriate in a few years. We should pay particular attention to sampling methods, so that we can reconstruct a comparable sample at project's end (see *MEL Tip Sheet: Sampling* for more guidance). While we may not want to interview the exact same people, we do need to be able to sample the same target populations, using a comparable sampling strategy.

Sampling questions for baselines:

Is the sample randomly generated?
Is it able to be selected in the same way for the final evaluation?
Is it representative of the planned target group over the life of the project?

It is very important to clearly document the methodology we use for our baseline in reports or other project documents, since high staff turnover can erode institutional memory. Storing the data in a safe place known to all staff is also crucial, as baseline data often gets lost over many years.

Recognizing changes that can affect our baseline data, and re-measuring when necessary. As a general rule, Mercy Corps projects and the groups they work with change and evolve over time. These changes can render our original baseline data irrelevant by the end of the project.

Types of changes diminishing the relevance of original baseline data:

Project strategy changes caused by:

- Shifting donor priorities
- New assessment information
- Changes in Mercy Corps strategy, capacity or staff

Target group changes caused by:

- Evolving needs
- Shifting local priorities
- Program ‘graduation’
- Migration
- Turnover of local NGO staff or officials

Contextual changes caused by:

- Seasonal variations
- Insecurity
- Elections
- Economic conditions

It is important to plan ahead by conducting timely data collection around events that can bring about these changes. This will allow us to capture important outcomes and keep our information up to date. For example, a youth project might want to measure increases in capacity over time. However, each year, many youth graduate and leave their communities. In this case, we may be able to conduct end-line indicator measurements each year for the youth that graduate, rather than waiting for the end of the project.

Assessing measurability and relevance of key indicators. The indicators chosen during the proposal phase are sometimes problematic. Part of the utility of conducting a baseline is to test the feasibility of collecting certain indicators, as well as assessing their ability to demonstrate results.

Key indicator questions:

Is the indicator reasonable to measure?
Is it able to be measured in a consistent way over the life of the project?
Is it relevant for demonstrating the effects of the project?
Are the targets we’ve set realistic?

Based on the experience of collecting indicators during the baseline, the project may be able to make the case to the donor for altering the indicators to reflect current or more appropriate field realities. It is important to identify poorly-designed indicators early on, so that we can adjust before it is too late.

Planning for impact assessment through the use of control groups. The ability to rigorously assess impact at the end of the project can be enhanced by including a “control,” or non-project participant, group in the baseline. This allows us to make comparisons of knowledge, attitudes, behaviors or conditions between groups that were involved in the project and those who were not, showing the added value, or impact, of the project.

Control groups:

Involve measuring indicators for groups or individuals who will *not* participate in or benefit from the project.
Should be as similar as possible to the project group (motivation, socio-economically, demographically).
Should be selected randomly in the same way as the project group.

Donors are increasingly advocating for the use of control groups to assess outcomes and impact, and we want to be able to rigorously assess the effects of our activities. Gathering data from control groups does require additional time and resources, so we must do this carefully. We usually include control groups in baseline studies for large, long-term projects, high profile pilot projects, or studies tied to long-term country program strategies.

Another challenge is how to sensitize and work with control groups when they do not receive project benefits. A good strategy is to find a small programming element where they could participate, or other token of appreciation for their participation in the study, that will not bias results. We must be aware of contamination issues, whereby the control group is still affected by the project through, for example, contact with neighbors. This would decrease the differences we would expect to see.

A Baseline Study Report is a Minimum Standard for Program Management at Mercy Corps.

Managing expectations and potential bias. Data collection involving the local population often creates heightened expectations. It is important that we attempt to manage these expectations by carefully explaining the objectives of our study and being realistic about the prospects of our working in a particular area or with a particular group. Sometimes, the desire to attract resources or interventions to the community can lead to bias on the part of respondents or local officials. We can counteract this by attempting to cross-verify information and following up with direct observation where possible.

Reporting baseline results. First, the methodology and results of the baseline study should be documented in a Baseline Study Report, which is a Minimum Standard for Program Management at Mercy Corps. As with any M&E activity, we should have a strategy for disseminating the results of our baseline for analysis among beneficiaries and other local stakeholders. Meetings should be held with project staff and local partners to go over the results together and discuss their meaning for project implementation. This could be a formal or informal meeting, or an analysis workshop. The following should always be discussed: key findings from the baseline, possible adjustments to project activities, lessons learned in data collection, feasibility of indicators and targets, follow up data collection activities, and plan of action for implementation.

An analysis workshop with staff and partners can discuss the following:

Key findings from the baseline
Possible adjustments to project activities
Lessons learned in data collection
Feasibility of indicators and targets
Follow up data collection activities
Plan of action for implementation

Additional resources:

- MEL Tip Sheet: Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis
- MEL Tip Sheet: Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis
- MEL Tip Sheet: Focus Group Discussions
- Baseline/Evaluation Scope of Work Template & Sample