

VOLUME 2: BASELINE GUIDANCE

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The Purpose of Baselines

The baseline is the first piece of data that should be collected for a performance indicator. The baseline establishes a specific value or values to serve as comparison point for future data for **performance monitoring**. For example, baseline rates of poverty, stunting and underweight should be collected at the beginning of Feed the Future programs and compared with rates of poverty, stunting and underweight at a later point in time to track the progress that Feed the Future programs have made. All indicators on which the Mission reports within the Feed the Future results framework require a baseline. Some baseline data are collected through surveys, others through implementing partner records, among other methods. Many output indicators (e.g. number of people trained) will have a baseline of zero (0) because the Feed the Future-funded activities on which they report would not yet have produced any outputs.

The objective of performance monitoring baseline data collection is not to start new research, but rather to:

- ✓ establish the starting point for indicators
- ✓ reveal the nature, magnitude and severity of a situation
- ✓ ascertain appropriate amounts of intervention that will be required
- ✓ determine targets

Separate or additional baseline data should be collected for **performance and impact evaluations** to address the specific questions these evaluations are attempting to address. These evaluations may or may not use the baseline data from the performance monitoring of Feed the Future indicators through surveys and implementing partner's data collection (described above), depending on whether that monitoring data is relevant to the evaluation questions posed.

Once the baseline for an indicator is known, explicit targets should then be set for each indicator. Baselines are important for determining the extent to which progress is being made toward the targets and provide information for learning, management, accountability, and benefit-cost analysis. The importance of having a starting position from which to measure change is one of the most important issues related to monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Without a **documented baseline**, the past or starting point has to be reconstructed, in one way or another, to determine change and impact. Reconstructing the past without a baseline often results in faulty recall of earlier situations and lack of valid and reliable information, as well as an inability to tell our story about the changes that have occurred.

Principles for Baseline Data Collection

- *Good planning* – The quality and relevance of baseline work for the Feed the Future initiative will be determined in part by careful, upfront planning that identifies **who** collects **what** data **when**, so that reliable baseline information is collected before or as near as possible to the start of the interventions.
- *Explore a variety of data sources* – Baseline information sources include: primary information from surveys, secondary information from documents and records, database information from respected national/international sources, NGO and PVO records, recorded observations, earlier studies.
- *Disaggregate appropriately* – Often baseline information is disaggregated by sex, gendered household type, commodity, and other relevant groups essential for tracking progress of activities and interventions.

- *Quality assurance* – Baseline data collection techniques must be monitored to ensure that information is both valid and reliable, that it is easily assessable, that it is correctly stored in appropriate databases, and that it addresses indicators required for tracking progress toward targeted results and expected impact.
- *Host country training opportunities* – Baseline information collection provides opportunities for host country capacity strengthening. It is important to include key host country professionals, whenever possible, as part of the planning for data collection, tabulation, summarization, storage, and periodic comparison with indicators.
- *Feedback and learning* – Baseline information collection should be viewed as critical first steps for knowledge management, sharing and learning by carefully documenting how well-planned interventions are meeting identified needs to reduce poverty, hunger and malnutrition.

Baselines and Target Setting

It is difficult, if not impossible, to establish reasonable performance targets without some idea of the starting point. Ideally, the baseline is a value or a “benchmark” of the indicator(s) at the beginning of the planning period. In addition to establishing a benchmark value, the baseline is important to help capture the underlying historical trend in the performance indicator(s) value over time. Or, what pattern of change has been evident on the indicator(s) over the past 5 or 10 years. Is there a trend—upward or downward, for example—that can be drawn from existing reports, records, or statistics?

Baselines under Feed the Future

Operating units will need to collect baseline data for **performance monitoring** indicators and **performance and impact evaluation** indicators and should plan how those data will be collected. In many cases, Feed the Future indicator data will be collected by a contractor or implementing partner that is not on board at the time baselines need to be collected.

For **performance monitoring**, operating units will measure a number of high-level (or “impact”), outcome-level, and output-level indicators. Baselines for project-level output and outcome indicators will usually be collected either by implementing partners or by a local or centrally managed M&E contractor.

For **performance and impact evaluations**, operating units will need to determine the evaluation questions they want to research and then determine the indicators or variables they want to collect as a way to answer those questions. In most cases, a contractor hired to conduct the evaluation will collect data throughout the life of the projects – collecting baseline data around the key questions for the evaluation at the beginning of the project, potentially at the mid-point, and at the end. The evaluation design may also include on-going data quantitative and qualitative data collection from a set of households (panel) over the life of the evaluation.

The following documents are helpful USAID reference materials to support baseline data collection planning and implementation. These papers are brief, detailed, and useful. Click to download.

Helpful References

- [Technical Note on Developing Results Frameworks](#)
- [Preparing a Performance Management Plan](#)
- [Data Quality Checklist](#)