

Output and Outcome

Many social entrepreneurs struggle with the meanings and differences between output and outcome. This article is to help explain the definitions of these terms. We start by looking at the elements of a social program.

Social Program

Fig 1 shows the traditional structure of a social program.

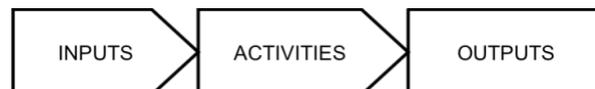


Fig 1. Traditional Social Program Structure

A social program may be defined as a series of activities or services with a definite beginning and leading to a defined and predictable end to achieve a set of social objectives. The program is created or developed to meet an identified social need or to help solve a social problem. In so doing, various resources are used to promote, support and carry out the program. The organisation that sets up the program and carries it out may be called the service provider or program provider.

Inputs

Inputs required to conduct a social program consist of various resources, such as people, physical, financial and information resources. They include equipment, supplies, tools, facilities, staff, volunteers, and money. Do not forget intangible inputs such as time and ideas, and inputs that will affect the design and conduct of the program such as laws, regulations, as well as funding terms and conditions.

We may think of the stakeholders involved in a program as inputs as well. These are the program provider and its staff; external people such as volunteers, professionals and consultants if any; the funders; the participants who are the beneficiaries of the program; and in some cases the authorities.

Activities

Activities are what are done with the inputs, and the action steps and processes undertaken with the participants, to fulfil the objectives of the program, which are to meet the needs of the participants or to society at large. Activities are strategies, techniques, and service methodology used in a program. More specifically, they may be teaching, training, counselling, sheltering, feeding, clothing, and job preparing.

Activities may be conducted as talks, courses, workshops, outings, projects or surveys. It is important to note that traditionally, activities focus on what the program does, and the outputs that will be achieved, and not the impact on the participants. However, with greater realisation of the importance of outcomes, program providers try to select or conduct activities that will lead to better outcomes.

Note that activities include pre-program and external actions such as preparations, recruitment, marketing, fund raising and consultation.

Outputs

Outputs are the direct products of program activities. They are units of measures of the program deliverables, the volume of activities and services, the amount of work accomplished, and the people served. They are all usually expressed in quantitative terms. Examples are the number of classes or people taught, counselled, sheltered, fed, or clothed; the number of clients served, books published, number of hours of training, counselling sessions, and so on.

Again, outputs say nothing about the actual impact on participants. Outputs have no inherent value but are still important as they could lead to desired benefits or changes, which are outcomes.

Outcomes

There is an emerging trend for funders to require social program providers to show whether or how much the beneficiaries have benefitted or been improved; in other words, the outcomes experienced by the beneficiaries. After all, these are the objectives of the social programs and hence their worthiness for support should be based on the quality of the outcomes. It is not so much the quantity or quality of the inputs, activities or outputs.

Nowadays social programs have evolved to be structured as outcome-based programs as shown in Fig 2.



Fig 2. Outcome-Based Program Structure

Unlike outputs which relate to the program, outcomes relate to the participants of a program. They express the benefits, changes or impact experienced by the participants because of the activities and outputs. These are usually expressed in qualitative terms. However there can be indicators that can be identified and measured to provide quantitative results to reflect the quality of the outcomes.

Some outcomes are not achieved immediately as some changes take time to develop in the beneficiaries. Therefore outcomes are often categorised into immediate or short-term outcomes, intermediate or medium-term outcomes, and long-term outcomes.

Short-term outcomes are initial benefits or changes to participants. They are important as they are indicators of real progress achieved by the participants and they can lead to longer-term effects. The more immediate an outcome, the stronger is the program's impact in this aspect on the participant.

Medium-term outcomes are those changes in behaviour and outlook that take a longer time to develop and arise from new knowledge, skills or attitudes acquired by participants from the program.

Long-term outcomes are ultimate outcomes, which are permanent and meaningful changes in the participants, often in terms of their conditions or status. The longer term the outcome, the more likely that other influences may interfere, thus reducing the chances of success. Also it would be more difficult to attribute the outcome to the program.

Example of an Outcome-Based Program

Here is an example of an outcome-based program and its elements. Consider a program to develop skills in finding jobs for ex-offenders.

- Inputs would be money, program staff, volunteers, consultants, computers, facilities, curricula, training materials, training equipment such as a projector and screen and perhaps a camcorder to record and show role-playing interviews.
- Activities would be talks, workshops, role-plays, mentoring, group sessions, and training exercises such as job searching and selecting, application writing, resume writing, and interviewing. Pre-program activities would be coordination of staff, volunteers and materials, promotion of the program, recruitment and selection of participants, location of training facilities, and discussions with potential partners and funders.
- Outputs would be the number of participants, levels of attendance, course completion rates, materials developed, materials used, training sessions held, and the number of trainers and their hours. Note that none of these describe what happened to the participants.
- Outcomes would be measures of the benefits derived by the participants. Did the ex-offenders acquire the desired skills, did they show greater confidence at interviews, and were their self-awareness and self-presentation increased? These are immediate or short-term outcomes that

can be tested or assessed at the end of the program. After a period of time, the participants could be surveyed to find out their success rates in applying for jobs, going for interviews and securing jobs. These would be medium-term outcomes. Long-term outcomes would be the number who stayed on their jobs, for how long, and the rate of recidivism.

Categorisation of Outcomes

Literature on outcomes has quoted a couple of acronyms for outcomes. One is BACKS to stand for changes in Behaviour, Attitude, Condition, Knowledge and Status. Another is KASA, which represents Knowledge, Attitude, Skills and Aspirations. We can perhaps combine them together with Values to form BACKSAVS to stand for Behaviour, Attitude, Condition, Knowledge, Status, Aspirations, Values and Skills. When thinking about outcomes, the acronyms help us to remember what they are or are not.

Another way of categorising outcomes is as follows:

- Learning: Awareness, knowledge, attitudes, skills, opinions, aspirations, motivation.
- Behaviour: Practice, decision-making, policies, social action.
- Condition: Social, economic, civic, environmental, literacy, self-reliance.

Outcomes would be changes, increases or improvements in learning, behaviour or condition.

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