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# Baselines for performance measurement

**A mini-guide to getting it right effortlessly**

## ABSTRACT

Many organisations confuse the use and content of a context baseline with the use and content of a performance baseline. As a consequence, they spend too much time collecting too much data, which is of little value to their goals: tracing and assessing work performance. This mini-guide is meant as an aid to organisations who conduct performance baseline assessments and who want to get it right effortlessly.

Malene Sønderskov, Strategihuset

# Baselines for Performance Measurement

### Saving time and money – get your baseline right from the beginning

How can we measure the results of our efforts to promote the rights of women, to prevent violence against children, or to introduce a culture of peace and democracy after decades of armed conflict? More and more donors and development organisations are asking questions like this, as funding declines and the need to demonstrate 'value for money' increases.

Developing a performance baseline may be both a relevant and a useful way to trace and document results. However, many organisations struggle to identify the correct relevant data for their performance baseline.

One reason is that many confuse the use of a *context baseline* with the use of a *performance baseline*. Therefore, they are left with huge piles of data that do not improve their ability to measure performance. This is a waste of time and energy, as well as money.

Strategihuset has prepared this '*Mini-guide to performance baselines*' to help social change organisations avoid the risk of producing, or requesting, baseline data, which turns out to be more or less useless as a tool for performance monitoring.

We hope this document will leave the (correct) impression that producing performance baselines may not be as complicated as you might think. We hope that the issues, outlined within, will inspire you when you are developing terms and announcing tenders for performance baseline surveys, or when you are setting out to develop a baseline on your own.

## What are baselines used for?

A baseline is a 'starting point' and a 'snapshot' of how a situation looks in a certain sector, geographical area, community or with a group of beneficiaries. Generally, baselines are used *either* to guide targeting and choice of interventions *or* to measure performance.



**Figure 1: Context or performance baseline. What are the differences; where do the challenges lie?**

*Context baseline*

A **context baseline** study is a descriptive cross-sectional survey that provides, mostly, quantitative information on the current status of a particular situation - on a study topic - in a given population, at a specific point in time. Context baselines are used as the input for context analysis and they help you target and legitimise your choice of interventions. Conducting a context baseline involves the systematic collection and presentation of data in order to gain a clear picture of a particular situation. It encompasses the following questions:

- What is the problem – or problems?
- For whom is it a problem?
- Where is it a problem?
- When does the problem occur?
- Why is it a problem?
- How is it a problem?

A context baseline normally covers only a sample of the population (not the entire population). It describes the context in which your beneficiaries lives and functions. It helps you understand the complexity of the target subject's environment and the causes of the problem you want to address. This will allow you to make an informed choice in terms of what you want to do, who you want to target and how you will contribute to alleviate the problem. The illustration in Box 1, overleaf, gives an example of issues that would be addressed in a context baseline on the withdrawal of girls from school.

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**Box 1: Context baseline: Prevalence and characteristics of the withdrawal of girls from school**

**What**: The withdrawal of female students before they finish secondary school.

**Who:** Girls, aged 10-15 years old.

**Where**: Prevalence is highest in rural areas in the districts of X, Y Z.

**When:** Girls have matured physically; families are unable to pay or need girls to assist in agricultural production.

**Why:** Household poverty combined with cultural norms that do not appreciate education for girls.

**Box 2: Performance baseline: Prevalence and characteristics of withdrawal of girls from school**

**What:** Knowledge, attitudes and practices of rural families towards the enrolment of girls in school.

**Who:** Parents (mothers and fathers).

**When:** Daughters are physically mature enough to marry and/or families need extra hands for the agricultural production.

## What are the relevant questions to ask, when I prepare a performance baseline?

*Performance baseline*

A baseline study for **performance measurement** is a descriptive set of data that provides quantitative and qualitative information on the current status **specific to the work** that is involved **in your intervention, program or project**. A performance baseline helps you assess the short-term and intermediate results you create with your beneficiaries, directly related to your efforts.

A performance baseline is made at the start of the intervention, in order to create a point of comparison for the post-intervention situation. This will help you, or an external evaluator, assess how effective your intervention has been and to what extent.

Box 2 shows what the focus of a performance baseline related to girls' withdrawal from school might look like, in an intervention that aims to target parents and students to change their attitudes and – ultimately decisions – regarding early school withdrawal.

When you plan a performance baseline survey, your aim is to collect data that will enable you to *measure the performance of your intervention within a given period of time.* Typically from you begin your intervention till the end. Therefore it is relevant to consider the following questions, when you identify *what to measure* in your performance baseline:

*Question One: How do you intend to address the problem you have identified (What is your intervention)?*

The purpose of performance baselines is to measure performance, that is, how well and how much your *intervention* contributes to changes that are directly linked to your area of work. A first step towards designing a baseline for performance measurements is to define the nature of your intervention, and to anticipate the short and intermediate-term changes to which your intervention may contribute.

*Question Two: What are the short- or intermediate-term outcomes that might result from your intervention?*

Social change can rarely be attributed to one intervention alone. Very often it is the result of multiple programs and

external societal factors. To avoid your performance measurement being 'diluted' by external factors, as much as possible, it is important that you focus your performance baseline on factors to which your project can reasonably be said to have contributed significantly.

## Question Three: When are you going to 'measure' the change you are likely to contribute to?

Change takes time, often a longer time than we would want or wish for. For this reason it is important, when you prepare a baseline for performance monitoring, that you consider what intermediate changes you think you can realistically achieve, or contribute to, between the first performance measurement (the baseline) and the subsequent measurements.

Most grants cover interventions that last two to five years. Therefore performance baselines are destined to measure the changes that occur within this timeframe. However, social change agencies often make the common mistake of overestimating the changes that an intervention can create, or significantly contribute to, within such a period of time, or indeed between the first performance measurement (the baseline) and the subsequent measurements. The shorter the time-span between the first performance measurement (the baseline) and the following measurements, the fewer the changes you are likely to see, as illustrated in the figure below.
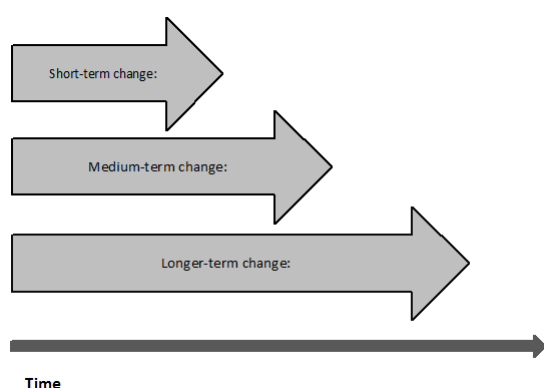


**Figure 2: Caption required**

In order to measure the *impact and effects* of our work, we need to look for baseline data and indicators that capture the shorter-term outcomes and results that our intervention could realistically be said to contribute to. The shorter the duration of the intervention, the less changes are we likely to create or contribute to by our

work. The shorter the interval between each measurement, the less are the changes that we are likely to measure.

A performance baseline may also focus on longer-term changes, such as changes in policies or institutional practices. However, measuring a project's performance against such changes is more problematic and difficult to measure since **a)** longer-term changes may only materialise after the end of a project, and **b)** even if changes do materialise, then a number of other factors outside the influence of the project may have contributed to this change.

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**Identifying Performance indicators for a project preventing withdrawal of girls before finishing secondary school (example)**

*How is the issue addressed:* Raising awareness among parents and pupils. Demonstrating the benefits of girls finishing secondary school.

*What are the likely short- and intermediate-term changes:* Realistic changes in a two-three year period include shifts in the parents' attitudes towards girls' enrolment in school, delays in the withdrawal of girls by an average of 11 months and stronger support among secondary students of peers who might be withdrawn.

*Frequency of measurements:* A performance baseline will be conducted among parents and students one month into the implementation. A mid-term performance measurement is planned in Year Two and an end-of project measurement is planned towards the end of Year Three.

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## Question 4: What sort of baseline data and indicators should I choose for my baseline?

There are three types of baseline data indicators that are typically relevant for interventions focussing on social change and human rights. They relate to:

- Demography
- Social status
- Characteristics of individuals

### A) Demographic and context related indicators

These are factors that are fixed such as date of birth; ethnic, racial and religious identity; primary language and gender; or factors that have an inherent tendency to be slow *to change* such as place of residence and family composition. Demographic indicators generally define the context within which people live and function.

Collecting demographic baseline data is useful when conducting *context* baselines. For instance, knowing the age of the girls who are most at risk from dropping out of school, as in the example above, may help you to focus your work in areas, and within population samples, where the prevalence of this problem is high.

Demographic and/or context related baseline data is often of little value to performance baselines. The reason for this is that changes in demographic, or context related baseline indicators tend to take place at a much slower pace than an average three to four year-long intervention. If you collect this data for performance baselines, you risk spending too much time on gathering a large volume of data that does not contribute to measuring performance.

### B) Social Status factor data

Social status data factors are similar to demographic indicators in that they tend to not change very quickly, although most can be influenced or changed with time. Unlike demographic baseline indicators they have well-established risk factors associated with them. By this we mean that people who fall under these categories *may* be in a vulnerable situation.

Examples include:

- Being food insecure
- Being unemployed or under employed
- Being homeless
- Being a school dropout
- Being a teenage "head of household"
- Being a frail elderly person

Collecting social status baseline data can help you **target your work** to groups that are likely to be at risk and focus your intervention on those people within an ethnic, religious or other demographic group that meets the relevant criteria of your intervention.

Social status factors are often slow to change. It may take several years to permanently reduce the prevalence of

food insecurity in a household, the number of child headed households or the prevalence of homelessness. Therefore, using social status data to compare a pre-intervention situation with the situation post intervention is relevant mainly, if the timeframe of your intervention is sufficiently long to actually allow you to affect social status factors during that intervention.

If not, using social status factors for performance baselines may lead to the conclusion that your intervention has had no impact. This is so, even though you feel that the intervention has brought significant change to the lives of your beneficiaries. To avoid this false impression you need to focus on risk-related indicators.

### C) Individual vulnerability-related baseline indicators

These are conditions or characteristics that can be influenced and that point to a significant probability that the individuals, families, or groups, who exhibit them will face major challenges to well-being and livelihood. Examples include but are not limited to:

- Chronic or acute illness.
- Engaging in behaviours that can lead to non-communicable diseases or drug addiction.
- Engaging in practices that contribute to an unsustainable livelihood or to debt.
- Lacking self-efficacy with regard to school, work, parenting, or participating in community affairs.
- Lacking the skills and knowledge to defend and promote one's own interests and rights.
- Lacking the knowledge and confidence to seek support.

Most of these factors relate to perceptions, skills, attitudes or behaviours (or lack of skills and behaviours) within those groups of beneficiaries, that our interventions seek to address. For example, being homeless (social status factor) is a major problem for people who don't have the funds to pay for a home or the skills to earn the money to do so. Being food insecure may be a more severe problem for a person who does not have access to land, water and seeds as well as lacking the skills to farm crops, than for a person with the necessary skills and access to resources.

Collecting data pertaining to vulnerability can be useful, both if you want to create a context baseline to help you

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understand the causes and severity of vulnerability, so that you can target those most at risk*, and* if you want to create a performance baseline so that you can compare a pre-intervention situation with the situation after the intervention has taken place.

The reason for this is that risk related indicators and risk factors are more likely, and faster, to change within the timeframe of a usual three to five-year intervention.

Therefore using risk related indicators and data, for a pre- to post-intervention comparison, may strengthen your ability to demonstrate progress and results in your work.

The table below shows the relevance of data concerning demographic factors, social status and individual risk factors for the two kinds of baselines, described above.

| Context and performance baselines – relevant data to collect | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Demographic data** | **Status factor data** | **Risk factor data** |
| **Context Baselines (used for pre-intervention planning)** | Relevant to collect | Relevant to collect | Relevant to collect |
| **Performance Baseline (used to assess effect of your intervention)** | Rarely, since demographic factors are very slow to change and the attribution of changes to our intervention is difficult to prove. | Yes on the condition that you make sure to leave sufficient time between the baseline and subsequent measurements so that your intervention has the time to influence status factors realistically. | Yes |

## Conclusion

This document describes the difference between a context baseline and a performance baseline. Context baseline data helps you describe and define a certain development problem, its scope, characteristics and causes.

Performance baseline data helps you measure your performance and effect, simply by comparing the first measurement (the baseline) with subsequent measurements.

Important issues to consider when planning a performance baseline are:

- What is the nature of your intervention?
- What are the likely changes that your intervention will contribute to in the short and intermediate term?
- What kind of factors should I look for to capture changes?
- How often do I want to measure performance?

In the next paper we will describe how you can use quantitative and qualitative data, as well as scales, to develop your performance baseline and subsequent measurements.

## Literature for inspiration

Davidson, Jane: Evaluation Methodology Basics 2005

Hunter, Working Hard and Working Well, 2012

Morino, 2011, Leap of reason – managing to outcomes in an area of scarcity

**http://usaidprojectstarter.org/sites/default/files/resources/pdfs/Guidelines-for-Project-Baseline-studies.pdf**

**http://www.sida.se/contentassets/b2d378352349455c999cf5f3f611cd63/baseline-study-handbook_2564.pdf**