

# An Approach to Monitoring Performance against the ActionAid's Strategic Objectives

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Draft (4th) concept paper by Rick Davies<sup>1</sup> for ActionAid  
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## 1. Background

My ToRs defined two immediate tasks facing AA.

- a) "The longer-term plan is to develop a simple, light framework for monitoring change against the Strategy Paper."
- b) "In the shorter term we would like to think about what we can ask the Country Directors to do this year, in terms of reporting against the Expected Outcomes in the AA Strategic Plan".

"The consultant is invited to work with a small team for one day (4<sup>th</sup> February) to think through potential frameworks / ideas / pitfalls and opportunities. The consultant will be expected to facilitate the day"

## 2. Proposed Approach

In the course of a wide ranging discussion on Friday 5<sup>th</sup>, I have proposed that AA use a form of success ranking to monitor changes against the FPT Strategy paper. The reasons for doing so are:

- Success ranking is *simple*. It can easily be grasped by staff at all level, as well as AA's partners and their ultimate clients - poor people.
- Success ranking is *light*, in terms of information demands. It typically makes use of what people already know, rather than demanding a new set of purpose-specific data.
- Success ranking requires *judgement*, as well as description. The latter is usually in relatively short supply in project progress reports.
- Success ranking involves *devolved* judgement. Performance measures do not need to be highly specified in advance or from above. However, people doing the success ranking can make use of such measures / indicators if they need to.
- Success ranking generates a *balance of quantitative and qualitative information*, both of which have further uses. Numerical ranking values are accompanied by text accounts of evidence and cause.

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- Success ranking, as proposed, is *extendable* to other forms of required reporting, such as the performance of DFID funded projects in terms of their Outputs, Purpose and Goal, as defined in a Logical Framework.
- Success ranking is *scalable*. It can be applied at different levels of aggregation, from the smallest common interest group in a village, to the international analysis of country programmes.

### **3. Success Ranking of Strategic Objectives: A Step-By-Step Guide**

- 1. Identify the type of performance that is of concern.** In this case it would be the achievement of a particular Strategic Objective. Success ranking should be done with one Strategic Objective at a time.
- 2. Identify the units to be compared.** I have argued that these should be client groups whose well being is of ultimate concern to AA. They should not be units of AA activities, whether defined in sectoral or more thematic terms (See below). The size of these groups will vary according the level at which the success ranking is being carried out. Within the DA's they may be villages, or small local government units. At the national level they may be DA's and other defined constituencies of concern. At the regional level they would be countries and other constituencies if they exist. At the international level they would be regional and other broad but definable constituencies with whom AA are working with at that level.
- 3. Identify the reference period.** This is the period of time AA wants to assess the performance of these units, in terms of the selected Strategic Objective. This may be the last month, quarter or year, or even longer.
- 4. Identify the appropriate respondent.** Ideally the person will be someone with direct managerial responsibility for the organisation's relationships with the groups concerned. Alternately, that person can facilitate a team approach, asking representatives of those groups to do the success ranking themselves.
- 5. Rank the units according to their relative success in achieving the change described by the Strategic Objective.** The best model for this process is wealth ranking, an exercise which many AA staff are familiar with. The respondent(s) should be allowed to make this judgement according to their own sense of the appropriate criteria. The results can be placed in the first column of a table, like that below.
- 6. Document the evidence and criteria.** Using a table format similar to that shown below, the respondents, or their facilitator, should document the basis on which the respondent(s) have ranked the groups. The easiest way of doing this is by a series of pair comparisons. The most successful group can be contrasted to the next most successful group, and the question then asked: "In what way was this group more successful than this one?" What is needed is the evidence that people see or hear, directly or indirectly (e.g. documents, word of mouth). This evidence usually contains implicit or not so implicit criteria of performance. Sometimes

people start explaining the *cause* of the observable difference. This should be avoided at this stage. The focus should be on eliciting verifiable evidence. This does not necessarily mean *measurable* evidence, simply something that can be *observed* with some degree of reliability. The results can be placed in the second column, like that table below.

7. In the case of the Corporate Strategic Plan there are already a number of performance criteria in the form of Expected Outcomes associated with each of the Strategic Objectives. When using the success ranking method AA will need to decide to what extent this list is to be seen as a required set of indicators (evidences), that must be used (solely or with others), or simply as a means of elaborating the meaning of the Strategic Objective. Incidentally, one benefit of not defining Expected Outcomes too specifically is that they remain amenable to local interpretation and choice of emphasis.
8. **Explaining the extreme cases.** The performance of the most and least successful groups should be of particular interest to AA. The most successful groups may have been due to some good practices that should be promoted and replicated elsewhere. The least successful groups may have been so for reasons that need to be addressed and removed. The value of focusing on extreme cases has been documented in a recent article in the Harvard Business Review, which describes the work of SCF US on malnutrition in Vietnam (HBR, January 2000, p14-15). The person doing the success ranking should explain why the most successful has been so, and why the least successful has been so. That argument should make reference to the evidence already cited. At the DA level these explanations will often include factors specific to what AA has been doing, but also other influences, including other organisations and even climatic events. This highlights another advantage of the group rather than activity as the unit of analysis, that it provides a more *holistic* analysis of developments. These arguments can be documented in the third column of the table.
9. **Developing recommendations:** If the analysis of the two extreme cases is done well then it should then be possible to draw out recommendations for action to address both circumstances: promoting the good and eradicating or mitigating the bad. These can be placed in the fourth column of a table. Care needs to be taken that these recommendations clearly relate to the explanations in the adjacent column, which in turn relate to the evidence in the second column. Good recommendations will be like good evidence, they will be specific and observable - in their effects.
10. **Audit the results as a whole:** The evidence, explanations and recommendations should be audited by another party. Within AA this would probably be best done by an immediately senior staff member. However, it could also be done by peers working elsewhere, or external stakeholders, such as government bodies. The "auditors" role should be check that the evidence is clear and solid, that the explanations are valid and the recommendations make sense. In the process of doing so they will in effect be doing providing capacity building assistance to the respondents.

In the approach being proposed devolution of responsibility is matched by accountability for the results. If a product label is needed for the process then it can be called an "Audited Self-Assessment" and even given its very own acronym (ASA).

### Examples from AA The Gambia.

The following examples were "first try's" by staff in the AATG programme. They had no previous experience, and only 20 minutes introduction to the method. The results are not perfect, and could easily be improved upon. But they provide some illustration of the process. Each example is followed by a commentary on how the results could be improved.

(See next page)

Achievement of SO1: <b>The Capacity of the Poor are enhanced to maximize their productivity and returns</b> in Zone K, DA3:			
Success Ranking	Evidence of Relative Success	Explanation of Causes of Differences in Success	Recommendations
1. Sololo Block	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. They have higher income levels</li> <li>2. Higher health status</li> <li>3. Availability of more food through the year</li> <li>4. Higher levels of education</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.... because they are involved more in non-farm income activities. E.g. vegetable gardening, tie and dye, SED. Because of training from AATG</li> <li>2.... due to easy access to health facilities</li> <li>3. ... because of increased rice production. Because of land availability ←</li> <li>4...because of willingness to send children to school, especially girls</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To PM ATG &amp; VDGs: We need to help people expand land availability.</li> </ol>
2. Faraba Block	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Higher food production</li> <li>2. Improved drinking water</li> <li>3. Reduced hungry season</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. ...because of access to rice production</li> <li>2. ...because of the availability of more handpumps and proper upkeep</li> </ol>	
3. Boraba Block	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Less involved in crop production</li> <li>2. Less access to clean drinking water</li> <li>3. Lower income levels</li> <li>4. Late intervention of NGOs assistance in the block</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Because of lack of far implements, ←</li> <li>2. Laziness ←</li> <li>3. Wild animals destroy crops ←</li> <li>4. Outside agencies have poor understanding of local needs</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To PO and PM: Give a greater proportion of the Zone budget to this block.</li> <li>2. AATG to investigate policy changes needed on wildlife killing</li> <li>3. Other agencies need to encourage more self-reliance</li> </ol>

**Comments**

1. Most of the evidence of success seems to relate to a period further back than just the last year, which was the intended reference period.
2. Each evidence statement would be acceptable if it was the first sentence in a paragraph. This sentence would then be followed by some substantiation of the claimed evidence.
3. Many of the explanations were given in the process of citing evidence (hence the "...because" format). Explanations numbers here correspond to evidence numbers
4. Most explanation statements would benefit by supporting text.
5. Some of the proposed recommendations (hunting policy) are "outside of the box" - outside AATG's existing local way of doing things.

Achievement of SO1: <b>The Capacity of the Poor are enhanced to maximize their productivity and returns</b> in Zone J, DA3:			
Success Ranking	Evidence of Relative Success	Explanation of Causes of Differences in Success	Recommendations
1. Kob Ousman block	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Money has been recycled better here</li> <li>2. More sanitation tools provided</li> <li>3. More sanitary latrines constructed</li> <li>4. More mud stoves cast</li> <li>5. More sanitary water points installed</li> <li>6. Changes in leadership structure were addressed</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. They have received more training from AATG</li> <li>2. The VDGs are more mature</li> <li>3. It is easier for them to access AATG training, because they are more central. Especially for women</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. These CBOs should share their experience with other Blocks</li> </ol>
2. Galleh block	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. More successful seed schemes than Njoren</li> <li>2. Received more agricultural inputs than Njoren</li> <li>3. Received more agric credit from AATG than Njoren.</li> <li>4. Has been more active in creating linkages with other players, than Njoren</li> </ol>		
3. Njoren block	<p>Has been less successful than the other blocks in</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Seed banks</li> <li>2. Cereal banking</li> <li>3. Agric credits</li> <li>4. Income credit</li> <li>5. Trust fund recycling</li> <li>6. Latrine casting</li> <li>7. Mudstove construction</li> <li>8. Water provision</li> <li>9. CBO capacity building</li> <li>10. Linkage with others</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. They have received less training</li> <li>2. The VDGs are less mature</li> <li>3. A bigger block, in terms of number of villages and overall size</li> <li>4. High turnover of CDWs: 6 in last five years</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Re-demarcate the three blocks to even up the workload</li> <li>2. Have a 2 year minimum before transfer: are allowed</li> </ol>

**Comments:**

1. Almost all the evidence cited concerned AATG inputs into the villages. This makes the unbelievable assumption that there have been no other important influences on people's lives in the past year. This result may have reflected inadequate guidance on the use of success ranking.
2. As was noted by DA level staff who audited the results, not all the AATG inputs cited in column 2 were necessarily evidence of people achieving the strategic objective of "...maximize(ing) their productivity and returns" For example, casting of latrine slabs.
3. The explanation of least success in Njoren block highlighted an important issue that the Programme Director was not aware of before: high rates of CDW turnover in some blocks. The associated recommendations seemed feasible and appropriate.

In DA3, where these exercises took place, Project Officers were writing quarterly reports that were about 20 pages long. The equivalent report at the DA Managers level was about 30 pages long. At present these reports focus almost solely on activities, especially those undertaken by AATG. Restructuring these reports towards the analysis of results, as defined and explained through success rankings, could be done within the same page limits. Five of the six strategic objectives were seen as relevant at the DA level. This means that up to four pages could be allocated per SO success ranking in the POs reports. That should be *more* than enough space to substantiate the evidence and arguments, as suggested above. While a table format has been used above, a more narrative form of reporting could easily be used.

A number of useful comments were made by DA staff about the Success Ranking exercises. One was that in some cases they would like to give explanations, and even recommendations, for the less extreme cases. That would not be a problem. The focus on the extremes is simply the most cost effective way of using staff time, but if they felt they had the time or need to detail the other cases then they should do so.

Another comment, made by a CDW, was that they should not be doing the exercise, rather it should be done by the villages they were comparing. That sort of devolution of judgement would be entirely consistent with the spirit of Community Based Management as proposed in The Gambia. But prior knowledge and experience of the method by the CDW would of course be beneficial.

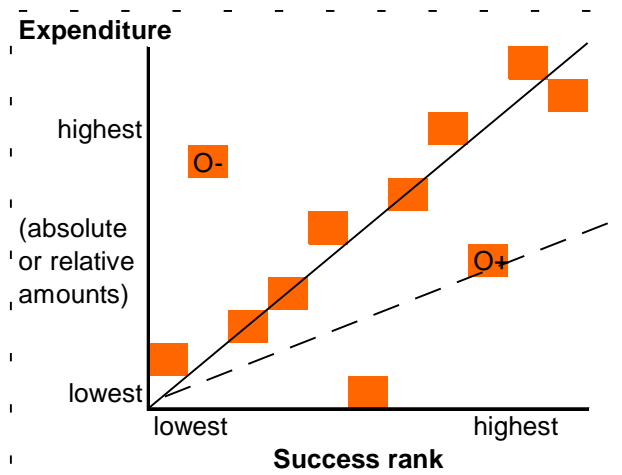
#### **4. Further Analysis: Relative Cost-Effectiveness**

Success ranking is about *relative* success. Using the results of success ranking it is also then possible to come to some useful conclusions about *relative* cost-effectiveness. AA has the capacity to identify how much is spent on each Strategic Objective, by country. Within AATG they are also able to know how much is spent on each country level Strategic Objective per DA, and other non-DA programme components. This expenditure data can be broken down even to the Zonal level. With a few small changes it will soon be possible to analyse it even at the block and village level. This has two implications:

1. Trends in programme content can be monitored over time, at all levels. Spending by Strategic Objective is a crude but useful way of describing programme activities. In AA The Gambia the amount budgeted to each CSP Strategic Objective in the year 2000 ranges from 38% to 2.6%. In the UK steps have already been taken by AA to monitor global changes in allocations across the different Corporate Strategic Plan objectives. The challenge will be to link that analysis to country level analyses based on CSPs.
2. Levels of investment into communities can be related to results at all levels of analysis, from the CDW up to the country level and beyond. Success ranking and expenditure data can be plotted on a simple graph by staff at any level within AA.

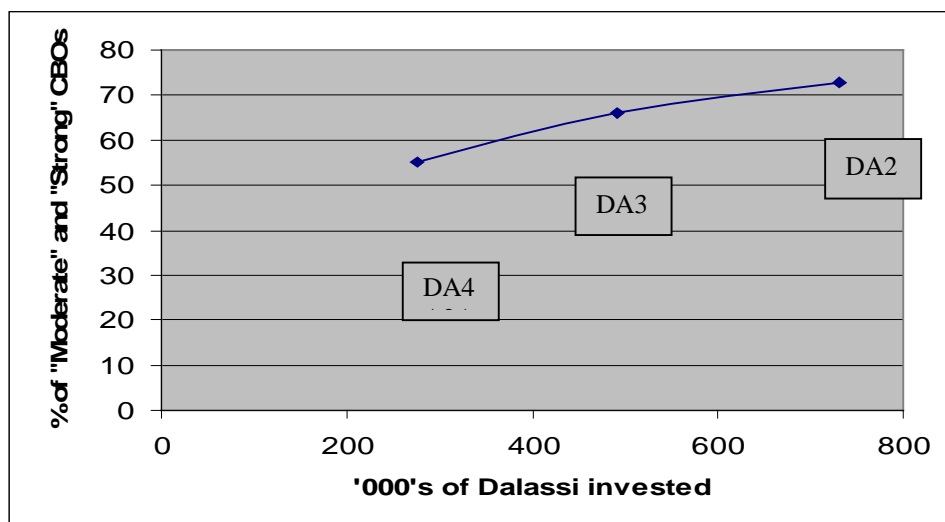
In the graph shown below, the (continuous) sloping line shows what we would normally expect, both in our private life and in the work of organisations. Increased expenditure should be associated with increased achievement or benefit. What is

interesting is not the trend line, but the exceptions. These "outliers" are the cases where conspicuous success is associated with lower than expected expenditure, or where conspicuous lack of success is associated with higher than expected expenditure. As with the extremes of the success rankings, it is these extreme cases that need further investigation, to generate a meaningful explanation and some useful recommendations. The ideal result would be that following the recommended action, the whole trend line would swing down to the right, such that the new (dotted) line passed through the previously defined positive outlier (+0). Such a large-scale change would represent an overall increase in *efficiency* (the same result for less cost)<sup>2</sup>.



### Examples From AA The Gambia

Ansu Gammeh, a senior staff member responsible for micro-finance was asked to success rank the three current DA's in terms of which was most-to-least successful in achieving Strategic Objective 4: *Existing local institutions are strengthened to mobilise and manage resources*. In this case he was able to use recent survey data on the performance of CBOs to make a success judgement (summarised in terms of proportions of "weak", "moderate" and "strong" CBOs). This judgement has been plotted below against the total amount invested into CBOs in each of the three DAs.



<sup>2</sup> Assuming no decline in the achievements of what was 0+

Broadly speaking the trend is in the expected direction. Greater investment is associated with greater success. The one feature that should be of concern is the slope of the line. It suggests that in order to achieve a 90% success level for DA2 it may require twice as much investment as has been made to date. Because each of the three data points represents between 144 and 263 CBOs, a subsequent analysis of the cost-effectiveness relationship *within* each of those DAs would be worthwhile. This sort of analysis may show local positive variations which could be learned from, and which would then enable the 90% level to be achieved at a lower total cost.

## **5. Aggregated Performance Measures**

There are three ways of giving DA's or country programmes an overall ranking, in terms of their achievements of all the Strategic Objectives.

- In the simplest case all Strategic Objectives can be regarded as equally important. In this case a country programme can be given an aggregate ranking equal to the average of its rankings on each Strategic Objective. OR
- A country's success ranking on a particular Strategic Objective can be "weighted" by the amount spent by that country programme on activities that address that Strategic Objective, if that figure is known or can be estimated<sup>3</sup>. See the appendix for how weighted scores can be calculated
- An alternative weighting device is to use the number of years that country programme has been addressing that Strategic Objective. This is a proxy measure for cumulative investment of money and human resources.

### Analysis of the aggregated results

This can be done in two ways:

1. Contrast expectations with calculated results. People will typically have tacit or not-so-tacit expectations of the results: which areas have the highest to lowest aggregated achievements. They will carry around an overall sense of where things have been going well and not so well, in most cases based on sources other than the success ranking exercises. These expectations may well differ from the aggregated results of the success rankings. Such expectations can be identified beforehand, or after the event - upon reflection of the results. As with the cost-effectiveness graph it is the outliers, the cases most contrary to expectation, that are worth the further discussion and analysis.
2. Each area (e.g. DA or country) can be seen as a different experimental mix of programme content. This mix is reflected in the differing proportions of their

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<sup>3</sup> Some might want to go further and weight that amount in turn by the cost-effectiveness of that expenditure within the country concerned, using the correlation co-efficient of the success and expenditure rankings in that country.

budgets allocated to the pursuit of different Strategic Objectives. These various mixes will be a result of both past practice and current perceptions of local needs. Further afield, at the headquarters of AA, there has already been an attempt to anticipate what an ideal mix would like in AA as a whole, in the foreseeable future. This can be seen as a hypothesis, one which needs to be tested against experience. The question is, how can this be done? One way is to see what evolves locally. That is, we need to observe over time why type of expenditure mixes (by SO) leads to a country or DA to consistently achieve the highest overall aggregate achievement score. Given the diverse nature of the world as a whole it is likely that there will end up being not one solution, but a number of solutions that have the best fit within their own regions.

## Implications for high-level strategic planning and management

There are two types of action that can be taken agents at (almost) any level of the AA hierarchy. One is to make judgements about relative success, and generate recommendations for action that will affect subsequent success within the frame of each Strategic Objective. The other is to make decisions about the amount of resources to be available in the pursuit of each Strategic Objective. This is a more boundary setting exercise, defining the range of possible experimentation within each Strategic Objective. This possibility already exists within AA's existing organisational structures.

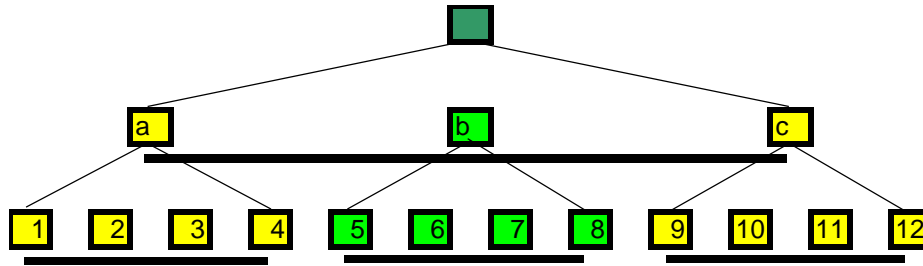
Another option is open to AA if it wants to enable more experimentation within each Strategic Objective. This is to *adapt the structure* through which the funds for these objectives flow and get allocated. At present AA funds flow down through geographically-defined and increasingly specialised structures (regions, countries, DAs, etc). An inverted tree structure. At each level the funder has a limited range of choices as to where money can be allocated. The funded have no choices as to where they make claims for money.

The alternative is to make use of a more *heterarchical* structure. Funds could be made available to regions and country offices from any of a number of funding pools - being the four Strategic Plan Goals, or their eight component Strategic Objectives. Managers of those pools in turn could make decisions about allocations across a much wider range of locations. Both "donors" and "recipients" within the AA hierarchy would have more choice.

## **6. Afterword: Some Possible Concerns**

### **1. It is difficult to rank large numbers of villages, DA's or countries.**

Correct. However most organisations have some intermediary layers of management each having a limited span of control. We can use these to do localised success rankings. The results of local success rankings can then be used as the information building blocks to make success rankings at a larger level. This is show schematically below.



2. **What do you do when there is not enough information to rank a group (/DA/Country)?** Give them a low rank. There are grounds for arguing that success which is not known about is of limited value.

The ability to do success ranking at a large scale of aggregation (e.g. of countries) will depend on the quality and availability of the information at the country level. The closer the success ranking exercise is to original "field" experience, the easier it should be, in the first instance. As information quality and availability improves, through the repeated practice of success ranking (and preparations for it) the easier the process should become at the higher levels.

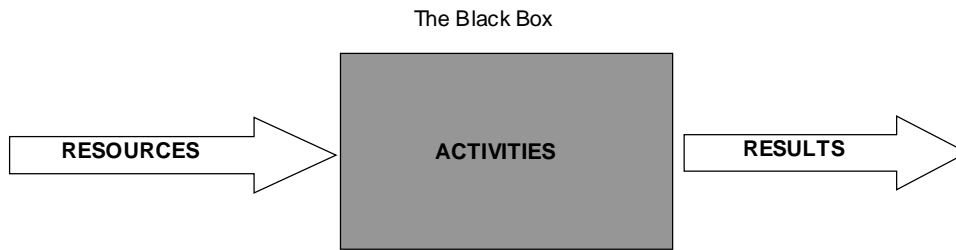
3. **This process looks very hierarchical. What happened to people's participation?** Rankings at any level can be made by the participants (1-4, 5-8, 9-12) or by their representatives or bosses (a-c).
4. **The whole process looks very subjective.** Correct. With highly top-down and pre-specified indicators the process could be made much more objective, and once above the field level it is possible all the data analysis could be mechanised. Whole levels of middle management could be got rid of! But this highly efficient system would probably be highly ineffective, because it would have such a poor fit with local context and history. It would not be measuring what matters.

The alternative is to devolve judgement but on condition that these judgements are made accountable in as publicly transparent a way as possible. That is the function of the evidence and explanation section of the success-ranking tables shown above, and the auditing requirement.

5. **Why don't we rank activities rather than groups?** The focus on groups is justified on the following basis.
- Like people, organisations are often myopic and self-centred. They find it easier to report on their own activities, rather than changes in other people's lives. Monitoring and reporting systems need to build in a countervailing bias, which favours the interests of their clients.

- Analysis in terms of groups of people rather than sectors of people's lives is likely to give us a more holistic analysis of change that takes into account many sources of influence, not just the actions of AA.
- If groups of people are the main unit of analysis then those groups can themselves be the primary source of judgement about the changes that have and have not taken place. AA's analysis can then take account of these views, and build upon them.

We should treat project activities as a black box, only to be described and investigated in detail in exceptional cases, such as those already outlined above.



AA inputs.....Changes in people's lives

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### Appendix A: Calculations Of Weighted Achievement Scores

1. Invert the ranking values, so that most successful area has the highest number, and vice versa.

2. For each area, e.g. a DA, proceed as follows

The DA ranks 4/4 on SO1 but only spends 10% of its budget on that SO

$$4 \times 0.10 = 0.40$$

The same DA ranks 3 on SO2 and spends 40% of its budget on that SO

$$3 \times 0.40 = 1.20$$

The same DA ranks 1 on SO3 and spends 15% of its budget on that SO

$$1 \times 0.15 = 0.15$$

The same DA ranks 2 on SO4 and spends 20% of its budget on that SO

$$2 \times 0.20 = 0.40$$

The same DA ranks 4 on SO5 and spends 15% of its budget on that SO

$$4 \times 0.15 = 0.60$$

$$\text{Total score} = 2.75$$

$$\text{Maximum possible score (4 on each of the 5 SOs)} = 4.00$$

$$\text{Total score as percentage of maximum possible} = \mathbf{68.75\%}$$

### On Monitoring sustainability

Steps to take:

1. Identify the groups or organisations or activities whose sustainability are of concern.
2. Rank these entities in terms of their relative success to date.
  - (Document the reasons for each difference in rank position)
3. Rank the same entities in terms of duration since initial or largest investment by the project, which ever is thought to make the biggest difference to their success.
4. Plot the location of these entities on a graph whose y axis is success rank, and whose x axis is duration or scale of investment
5. Identify what an ideal result would look like. For example,
  - Highest success ranking entity would be the oldest, and the least successful entity would be the youngest
6. Compare the actual distribution against the ideal. Identify those cases (entities) which are further from the ideal relationship. For example,
  - A very old entity which has a relatively low success ranking , or a new entity with a relatively high success ranking
7. Do an investigation into the reasons behind each of these extreme outcomes, in order to inform project practice thereafter (promoting the best and avoiding repetition of the worst).

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