



Measuring The Difference: An Outcome Evaluation Resource for the Disability Sector

MODULE 3

The Logical Road to Outcomes

Prepared for

Alberta Council of Disability Services

by

Nilima Sonpal-Valias

The Vocational and Rehabilitation Research Institute

The Alberta Council of Disability Services

Bay 19, 3220 – 5 Avenue NE, Calgary, AB T2A 5N1
Phone 403-250-9495 • Fax 403-291-9864 • Email accred@acds.ca
Website: www.acds.ca

Module 3

The Logical Road to Outcomes

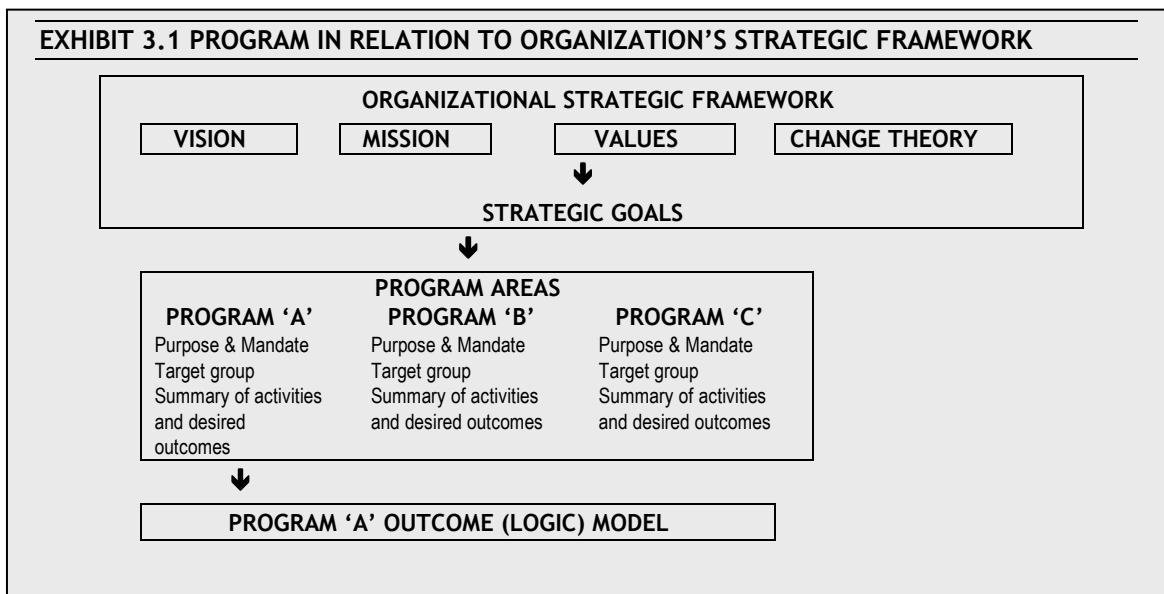
3.1 HOW ORGANIZATIONS GET TO OUTCOMES

Human services achieve their missions through the delivery of **programs**, i.e., coordinated and related activities intentionally designed and implemented to provide services to benefit a specified target population. What programs an organization chooses to deliver, to whom, in what manner and for what purpose, are based on the organization's **strategic framework**.

An organizational **strategic framework** typically consists of its:

- **Vision** (the organization's view of a future, desired state that it is striving for)
- **Mission** (the reason why the organization exists; its purpose. The mission statement usually also identifies the organization's target population)
- **Values** (the beliefs and philosophy guiding how the organization undertakes its work and interacts with the rest of the world)
- **Theory of Change** (the organization's set of assumptions and beliefs about how it can bring about the desired change; the organization's theory of change may not always be explicitly stated but is evident in the goals and programs it delivers)
- **Strategic Goals** (more concrete statements of the organization's vision broken down into clear directions that the organization wishes to pursue. Strategic goals reflect mission-related aims, but also provide direction for where the organization needs to go next in order to continue to achieve its vision effectively)
- **Program Areas** (a broad overview of the different sets of services that the organization offers to bring about the desired change in its target population)

Exhibit 3.1 shows the relationship between programs and the strategic framework.

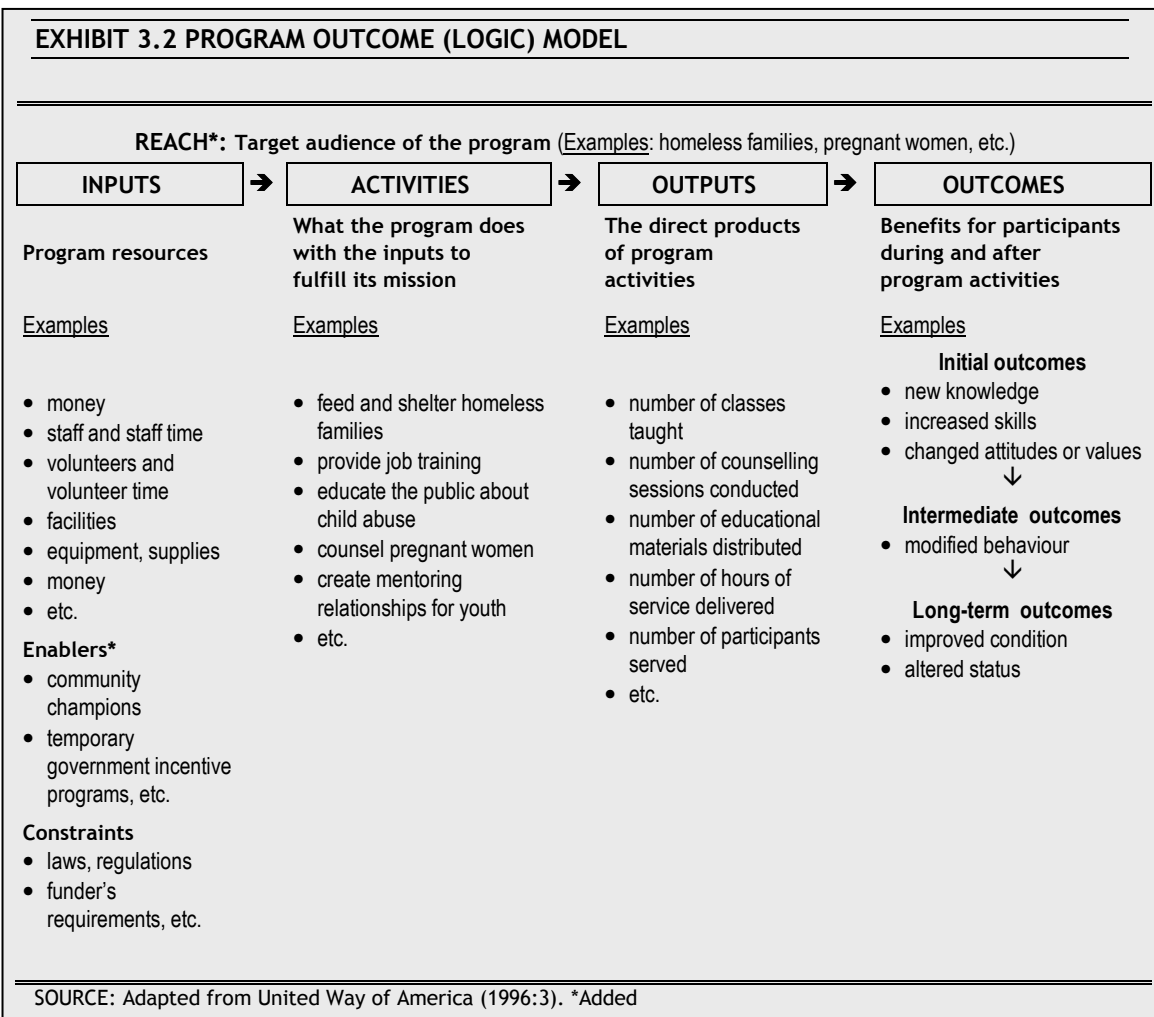


3.2 PROGRAM OUTCOME (LOGIC) MODEL

Each program has:

- a specific **purpose** that ties back to the organization’s strategic framework;
- a specified **target group** that the program is intended to benefit;
- a set of **activities** that it is mandated to undertake to achieve the required outcomes;
- specific **outputs** (deliverables/products) that are expected to result from its activities;
- human and material **resources** (inputs) that it is allocated to help it fulfil its activities;
- contextual circumstances that will influence its ability to achieve its purpose either positively (**enablers**) or negatively (**constraints**).

A Program Outcome Model (Exhibit 3.2) shows how these elements link to each other.



Inputs are the resources (human, financial and material) made available to or used by the program. Inputs also include enablers and constraints. **Enablers** and **constraints** are forces outside of the program that may influence any part of its inputs, activities, outputs or outcomes. Enablers influence the program positively, while constraints may make it more difficult for the program to achieve its outcomes.

Activities are what the program does with the inputs it has in order to achieve the programs stated goals. They include strategies, techniques, interventions, treatment plans, etc. It is the “delivery” aspect of service delivery.

Outputs are the direct products of program activities, e.g., number of counselling sessions facilitated, number of clients served, number of hours of support provided, etc. In and of themselves, outputs have little value; they are important in that they are intended to lead to positive outcomes for the program participants. Despite having little inherent value, most program measurement systems track and report program output data (rather than client outcomes).

Outcomes are the changes or benefits that occur to the program participants as a result of the program’s activities. They typically include changes in client knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviours, condition or status. They may occur during or after the client’s participation in the program and may be short-term, intermediate-term or long-term. Although all programs intend to achieve defined positive outcomes for their clients, the actual outcomes may be positive or negative, intentional or unintentional.

SPLASH AND RIPPLE METAPHOR

Splash and Ripple: Using Outcomes to Guide Community Work (PLAN:NET (2002) presents a useful metaphor to help understand some of this terminology. A copy of this document is inserted after the end of this Module.

VISUALIZE: Imagine a person holding a rock and dropping it into a pond. As it touches the water, the rock creates splashes. This is followed by ripples that originate at the rock’s entry point and spread out in all directions in the pond, gradually getting smaller as they get further. On the way, the ripples encounter other forces in the pond (other rocks, other ripples, plants, etc.) and their course may be altered by these forces. Ultimately, the ripples reach the edge of the pond and subside.

METAPHOR:

- The rock = *material input (resource)*
- Person holding rock = *human resource input*
- Dropping the rock = *activity*
- Splashes = *outputs*
- Ripples = immediate, intermediate and long-term *outcomes* and *impact*. The further away the ripples get from the splash, the weaker they get, and the more likely they are to be influenced and changed by other forces in the pond.
- Other forces = *enablers, constraints*, known and unknown
- Edge of pond = scope or *boundaries* of project (geographic area, target population, etc.)

Program Outcome Model and Program Logic Model

The Program Outcome Model is a core tool to understand the logical connection between program inputs, activities, outputs and direct outcomes. This can be also be read as a series of “IF-THEN” statements:

- IF we have the identified resources, THEN we can do the required activities.
- IF we do the required activities, THEN the outputs listed will occur.
- IF the listed outputs occur, THEN the initial outcomes listed for clients will result.
- IF initial outcomes occur, THEN the intermediate and long-term outcomes will result.

This hierarchy of “IF-THEN” statements describes the **logic** or the **theory** of how the program brings about its intended benefits for its participants. A Program Outcome Model is a concise description of the program’s logic, and is, therefore, also known as a **Program Logic Model**. The term Program Outcome Model is more easily understood by human service practitioners, while the term Program Logic Model tends to be favoured by evaluators. *Measuring The Difference* uses both terms interchangeably, leaning perhaps more often toward the latter.

A Program Logic Model may be depicted in different ways, e.g., in a basic table format (as shown here), with added elements to explain the program’s context, horizontally (as shown here), vertically, as a diagram of circles or boxes linked with arrows, or even just as a narrative. Regardless of how it is presented or what it is called, every logic model must include inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes in its presentation.

3.3 PROGRAM THEORY

Program theory is a set of assumptions about how program inputs and activities are related to each other (sometimes called *program process theory*) and to the program’s intended outcomes (*program impact theory*). The program’s logic model is a useful tool to describe the program’s theory, and a program evaluation is a useful exercise to test the program’s assumptions.

At an organizational and community level, assumptions about how to achieve social change are called **theory of change**. A **theory of change** identifies the essential building blocks needed to bring about social change, a map called a pathway of change or change framework, that shows how these building blocks interconnect, the interventions necessary to bring about change, underlying assumptions and the concurrent work of others to achieve the same goals. Like logic models, theories of change frameworks provide a useful way to create a commonly shared vision and an understanding of how to achieve it.

“A theory of change is an explanation of how the organization thinks that social change is brought about. It often identifies the essential preconditions that are needed for this change to occur. These preconditions enable the organization to trace a number of “outcome pathways”: visible and measurable short- and medium-term outcomes that will lead to its long term goals. Finally, it includes a reference to other actors working in parallel and complementary ways in order to achieve that change, which identifies the long-term relationships needed with other actors in order to achieve its impact.”

SOURCE: Center for Civic Partnerships (2008).

3.4 BENEFITS OF LOGIC MODELS

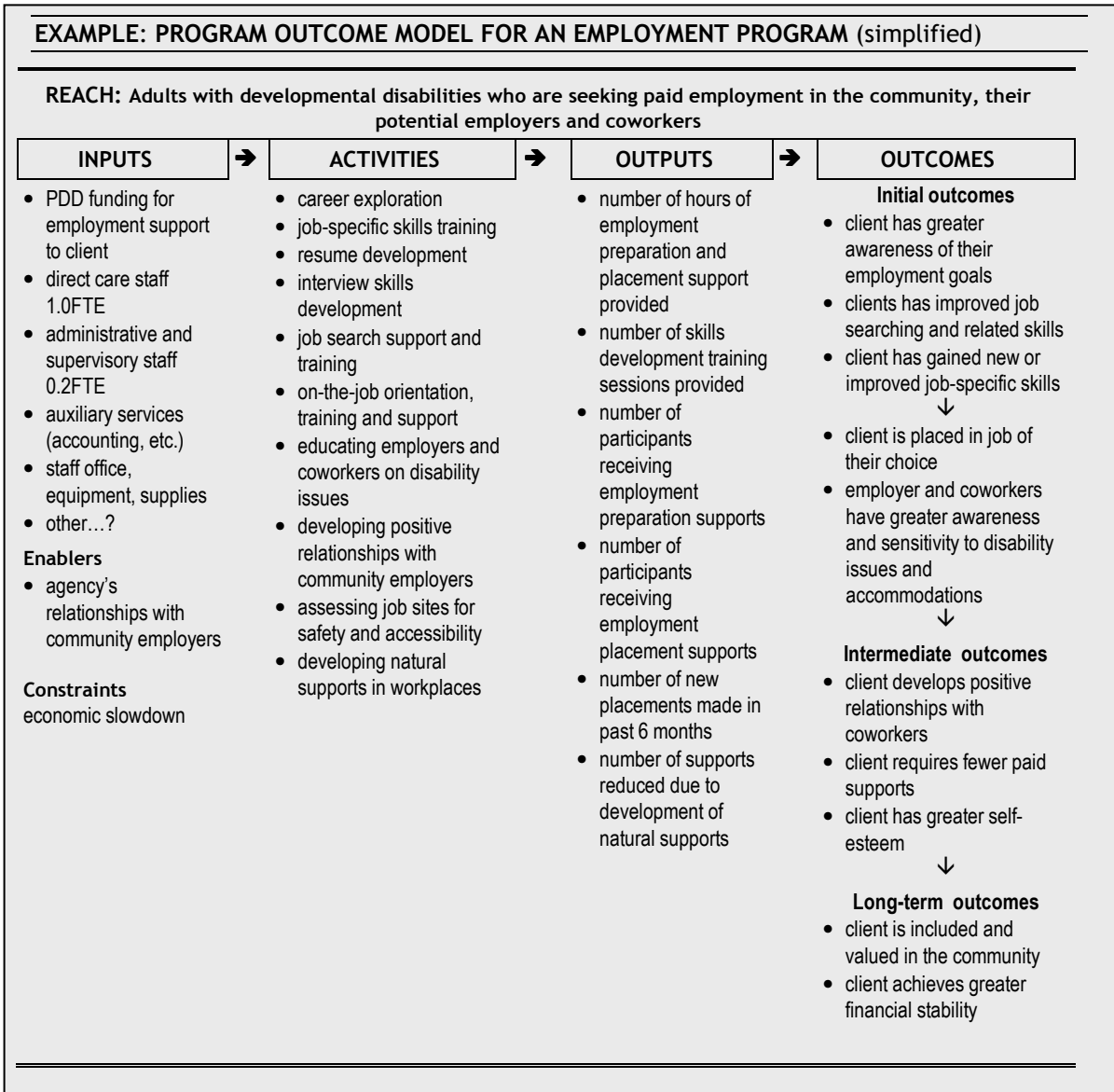
A clear story: Logic models are easily understood by funders, administrators, staff and most other stakeholders. They may need to be simplified for some audiences (e.g., individuals with developmental disabilities), but they are effective ways of telling the “program story” – what we do, what we need to do it, what is produced, and most importantly, why we do it.

A common understanding: Logic models are effective ways to build common understanding of the program to internal and external audiences, and to set clear expectations of the activities and the resources needed. It is easier for funders and administrators to understand (and agree to) resource demands if they see a clear link to client outcomes.

Key measurement points: When outputs and outcomes are stated as they are in logic models, it becomes easier to see potential measurement points, and also to detect if any necessary measurement points are missing from current data collection efforts. For example, for each of the program activities, how are we tracking what was done (outputs) and what the result was for the client (outcome)? If all these measurement points are not covered, we may be missing key elements that make our “program story” compelling.

Program improvement: By clarifying how the activities link to client outcomes, a logic model helps identify activities that are core (and therefore need to be maintained and properly resourced), those that are redundant (and therefore eliminated to free up useful resources), or those that do not fit with the program goals (and therefore require some reflection about the program’s theory).

Morale building: Constructing a logic model should be a collaborative activity, involving a variety of stakeholders (administrators, staff, volunteers, clients, etc.) who know most about the program. The act of engaging these stakeholders can, in and of itself, be an empowering experience.



3.5 DIFFICULTIES WITH LOGIC MODELS

Effort required: Logic models can take a fair bit of time and effort to construct, taking these away from the necessary task of program delivery. It is important to have all key elements identified, but the model should only be as comprehensive as needed for whatever the purpose of the logic model is at the time. For example, a logic model constructed to make a compelling funding argument may be far less detailed than one constructed for program evaluation purposes. Similarly, a logic model to show clients how the program works to achieve benefits for them can be in plain language, showing just key aspects that are meaningful to the client.

Too linear: Life is rarely as linear as depicted in a logic model. Most times, program activities result in some outcomes which then build on others in a circular manner, program and client

setbacks may occur, some things occur in parallel, and so on. Some ways to work-around the challenge of linearity is to use Z-flow charts (where the output of one chain becomes the input for the next chain, and so on), tree diagrams, Gantt charts, spirals, and even 3D diagrams to show the logic chain.

Too simple: The simplicity of logic models can be deceiving. Experts like Patton (2008) advocate for the use of **systems framework** to show the complex web of relationships among systems to understand the program and its outcomes; the systems framework makes it more explicit that change in any one system in the web could impact multiple others.

Rigidity: One criticism is that logic models are too rigid and do not capture the dynamic and fluid nature of program delivery in real life. In reality, logic models should be reviewed and updated regularly to keep up with program changes. Doing so would, in fact, reinforce the habit of critically assessing to make sure that despite changes, the program is still on track and has not suffered from “mission drift”.

How far down the IF-THEN chain...?: One of the challenges with the logic model is knowing how far to extend the list of outcomes. It is often difficult to know when a program’s influence becomes less important than other factors that the client may be exposed to. Generally, a program has less direct influence on longer-term outcomes than immediate ones. However, if the long-term outcome is a core outcome that the program is hoping to achieve, it should be included in the logic model and ways found to track and measure progress towards it, even if other extraneous factors may be influencing it. On the other hand, the logic model should not include outcomes that are not within the program’s purpose, nor should it include outcomes that are beyond the scope of the program’s target audience.

Unintended outcomes: A logic model does not (and cannot) show unintended outcomes, however, unexpected outcomes (positive and negative) can and often do occur in most human services. It is important that unexpected outcomes are monitored and, if necessary, addressed as best as possible by the program.

Despite these criticisms, experts agree that logic models serve a very useful purpose in making the program theory more explicit, creating common understanding among internal and external stakeholders, identifying key monitoring and tracking points and being a central tool for outcome evaluation and quality improvement purposes.

3.6 USEFUL ONLINE RESOURCES

Center for Civic Partnerships.

<http://www.civicpartnerships.org/index.htm>.

A website with a wealth of information, tips, tools, resources and links on evaluation, logic models, theory of change and community indicators.

Compass Partnerships Management Consultants. *Strategic Planning*.

http://www.compasspartnership.co.uk/knowledge/strategic_planning.php.

Information and tests for strategic planning processes and links to other resources.

Harvard Family Research Project. (1997). *Strategic Planning Process: Steps in Developing a Strategic Plan*.

<http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/publications-series/reaching-results/strategic-planning-process-steps-in-developing-strategic-plans>.

This article provides an overview of developing a strategic plan - the first step towards developing an outcome-based performance system.

Organizational Research Services. (2004). *Theory of Change: A Practical Tool for Action, Results and Learning*.

http://www.organizationalresearch.com/publications/aecf_theory_of_change_manual.pdf.

This publication walks the reader through the steps of developing a theory of change; the same principles can be applied to developing an outcome logic model. It provides a number of sample outcome statements, complex outcome models and learning tips.

3.7 ATTACHMENT

Plan:Net Limited. (2002). *Splash and Ripple: Using outcomes to design & guide community work*.

http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ahc-asc/pubs/_contribution/ripple-ricochet/index-eng.php.

REFERENCES

- Center for Civic Partnerships. (2008). *Theory of Change*.
http://www.civicpartnerships.org/docs/tools_resources/Evaluation%209.07.htm
- Patton, M. (2008). *Utilization-Focused Evaluation, 4th Edition*. Sage Publications, Inc.: Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Plan:Net Limited. (2005). *Managing for change: Introducing the art of results-based management*. <http://www.plannet.ca/pdf/srprimer.pdf>.
- Plan:Net Limited. (2002). *Splash and Ripple: Using outcomes to design & guide community work*.
http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ahc-asc/pubs/_contribution/ripple-ricochet/index-eng.php
- United Way of America. (1996). *Measuring Program Outcomes: A Practical Approach*, 13th Edition. United Way of America: Alexandria, VA.
- Wholey, J., Hatry, H. , & Newcomer, K. (Eds) (2004). *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation, 2nd Edition*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA.