Capturing results at global level and communicating them effectively

Potentials and limitations of aggregate indicators

What is GIZ's specific contribution to solving regional and global problems? What does it do, say, to mitigate the impacts of climate change or reduce global poverty? It is not only experts who are interested in the answers to these questions – the general public also wants more information about the results achieved. Providing proof of what has been attained is also becoming increasingly important within the context of the Millennium Development Goals and their successor, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which will come into force at the start of 2016. Like other organisations involved in international cooperation, GIZ is therefore faced with the task of providing the best possible proof of the effectiveness of its work and communicating this in a readily understandable way, not just for individual projects, but also on a global level. With this in mind, GIZ has carefully considered how best to record cross-project, transnational results, and since 2014 has been using aggregate indicators to capture these results. This position paper sums up our experience with the first company-wide data survey carried out in selected sectors to deliver proof of aggregated results.

Can project results from different countries really be combined?

Results orientation is one of the key quality features of GIZ's work. Monitoring and evaluation therefore focus strongly on substantiating results and boosting impact. This can be successfully done by looking at individual projects and examples. But can these results also be presented in an aggregated form, that is, across projects and national boundaries, on a regional or global level? How can we combine individual results from projects that are implemented under different overall conditions and in different contexts? After all, when formulating project objectives and indicators, care is rightly taken to make sure they reflect the specific national setting and are tailored to the respective partners. Beyond this, ideally they are also based on existing data collection systems in the country concerned. Only by doing so can they provide a suitable basis for project steering and for learning within the project, as well as for promoting ownership by partners. Objectives and indicators are often therefore very specific, even for projects in the same sector.

GIZ's first collection of aggregate data

In 2014, GIZ carried out a pilot phase, which was followed by the first company-wide data survey. This was designed to enable the presentation of results across projects and countries, and to find out about the potentials and limitations of this approach. To do so, the company formulated aggregate indicators in 11 selected sectors. More than 850 projects were involved in data collection. The crucial factors for selecting the sectors and aggregate indicators were

- whether the topic is relevant for PR;
- whether the topic is discussed at international level and is of strategic importance for GIZ; and
- whether a sufficient number of projects and programmes that can report on the aggregate indicators are implemented in the sector.

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What are aggregate indicators?

GIZ defines aggregate indicators as clearly formulated indicators on which data can be collected from different projects and programmes – operating in different contexts and under different conditions – using the same methods (including the unit of measurement), and covering the same period. The indicators must generate quantifiable data and be easy to measure. Aggregate indicator data do not necessarily have to be collected by all projects in a sector, only by those whose project approach is consistent with the focus of one or more aggregate indicators.

How should aggregate indicators be formulated?

The following aspects have to be considered when formulating aggregate indicators:

Aggregate indicators ...

- must be designed such that the largest possible number of projects in a sector can provide data;
- should only cover easy-to-measure and quantifiable aspects of a sector;
- must be precisely worded so that they can be understood in the same way in all contexts and under all conditions. (Technical) terms may also need to be defined to ensure that everyone has the same understanding of the data to be collected;
- call for absolute figures because percentages cannot be aggregated without simultaneously recording the total population.

Examples of aggregate indicators:
'Number of people who were provided with state-of-the-art energy (for cooking, electric power) thanks to the contribution made by GIZ between 2005 and 2013.'

'Number of people among the general population who received legal insurance cover from 2010 to 2013 with support from GIZ.'

Good for effective communication

The intended use and purpose of the aggregate data determine the content of the aggregate indicators and the methodological requirements they have to meet. Based on its experience in the pilot phase, GIZ decided to use aggregate data primarily for effective PR and communication.

Limitations of aggregate indicators

- Aggregate indicators must be very broadly worded and not refer to any specific context so that the largest possible number of projects can report on them. In many cases, that makes them unsuitable for steering portfolios and projects, which can only make appropriate decisions based on project- and context-specific indicators.
- Aggregate indicators can only map easily quantifiable partial aspects of projects, not their full results. If they were to be used (for example as an obligatory requirement) for measuring to what extent a project has achieved its objective and also at the same time for making comparisons with other projects in the sector, there is a risk that the objectives and resources would be formulated during project planning in such a way so as to achieve the highest possible values for the aggregate indicators. This would not do justice to the diversity of approaches, topics and instruments involved.
- What is more, we should exercise caution when comparing projects based on aggregate indicators because this does not take contextrelated factors into account. It is essential to do so, however, in order to make plausible comparisons.
- There is a further risk of creating a system that offers incentives to pick 'low-hanging fruit'. That means a shift towards objectives that are easy to achieve in the short term, thereby reducing the quality and sustainability of measures and approaches. This may also divert our attention from the fact that the main purpose of project work is to achieve qualitative changes.
- It is also difficult to compare results over the course of time on this basis. To do so, the projects would have to collect data on the indicators at exactly the same time in two specific measurement periods. This is rarely possible because projects have different terms and progress in different ways (e.g. portfolio shift in a different sector). They also end at different times.

Requirements in terms of methodology and content

Aggregate indicators may be quantitative or qualitative. Most of the aggregate indicators in the 2014 data survey were quantitative, because quantitative factors are easier to aggregate and map. It is also best to aggregate qualitative results in terms of quantity, e.g. by looking at the number of individuals whose working conditions have improved. However, not all aspects or thematic priority areas within a sector can be mapped by presenting cross-project or transnational results. There are many qualitative aspects that are often hard to present even at project level. In these cases, aggregation is not feasible and individual examples have to be used instead.

Aggregate indicators can be created and measured at all results levels. Deciding which results level is suitable mainly depends on the individual sector and project approaches. Generally, though, it is easier to prove the results produced at the lowest level (output level) than to measure which short-term and medium-term results these generated at the outcome level, and which longer-term overarching development results (impact level) were thereby achieved. It is particularly difficult to attribute the established results to a specific project intervention. For this reason, GIZ also resorted to plausible assessments when collecting data on results at outcome and impact level. Thus, for example, the number of people who were reached by and benefited from a particular measure was deduced from the number of supported water and sanitation companies and the number of people living in the catchment area. Although data determined in this way are not suitable for project steering, they still give the general public a reliable impression of GIZ's sphere of influence.

Aggregate indicators only measure project results at a specific point in time. They do not enable us to draw any conclusions concerning development over the course of time. However, since the measurement period is clearly defined, the time frame to which the data refer is also clear. When planning the data survey, GIZ consciously decided not to collect baseline data or define target values. This is difficult in terms of methodology because unforeseeable crises or portfolio shifts may mean that the same projects may not be able to provide data over the course of time and that a target value can either no longer be achieved or is no longer comparable with a previous measurement period. This affects both baselines and target values.

What must be considered during data collection

Aggregate indicators are not mandatory when designing a project. They do not have to be used to measure the achievement of objectives. However, during the two-yearly data survey, all projects and programmes are requested to examine whether they can contribute data to the predefined aggregate indicators. The indicators must therefore be worded such that the required data are easy to collect, if necessary on an ad hoc basis, without using substantial resources.

GIZ collects data for ongoing projects for a predefined time frame, independent of the individual project term. This can mean that projects launched shortly before the data survey is carried out do not yet have any figures to contribute to the aggregate indicators. On the other hand, this method produces a realistic picture of the results that GIZ helped to achieve within the defined time frame. Another advantage of collecting data from ongoing projects is that the project team is on site and can gather information ad hoc if necessary.

To avoid double counting, data entry within the country needs to be coordinated. There is an online tool that supports this process.

Communication of the aggregate data

Projects that GIZ is commissioned to implement are always carried out with local partners and people, and possibly also in conjunction with other donors. GIZ's contribution towards achieving a result is therefore only one of many. This must be made clear when producing PR statements based on the aggregate data. Thus, GIZ describes its contribution to a specific result but does not attribute the achievement of this result solely to its own interventions. This applies to results at all results levels.

PR statements are mainly used at GIZ for external communication (e.g. for informing the media, on GIZ websites and at conferences). These statements may also be used for internal and external (technical) presentations, papers or publications.

Conclusion: positive experience with reporting on aggregated results

With regard to the wording and collection of data for the aggregate indicators, the experience with the first reporting on aggregated results has been positive. Using statements on aggregated results, GIZ can communicate the key impacts of its work in a succinct and effective manner. In most sectors it was possible to identify thematic areas that apply to many projects, and the amount of effort required by projects to collect corresponding data on results that can be used for effective PR communication was very reasonable. It is vital, however, that the aim and purpose of data collection are clearly defined and that specific methodological conditions and requirements are taken into account.

These data do not replace the project-specific proof of results produced within the scope of resultsbased monitoring and evaluations. They do, however, play a supporting role in substantiating results and thus contribute to the public debate on aid effectiveness by helping to illustrate the results achieved in the field of international cooperation.

Further information

Holzapfel, Sarah (2014): Darstellung von Ergebnissen in der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit – Risiken und Grenzen (Presenting results in development cooperation – risks and limitations). German Development Institute: Analysen und Stellungnahmen 4/2014.

Verband Entwicklungspolitik und humanitäre Hilfe (VENRO) (2015): Nutzung von Standardindikatoren in der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit (Using standard indicators in development cooperation). Standpunkt Nr. 1/2015.

Examples of effective PR statements

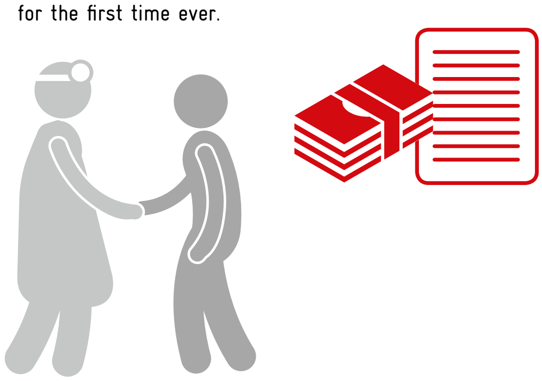
Every five minutes, a young person in a developing country or emerging economy improves their prospects for the future with support from GIZ. In 2012 alone, GIZ helped about **100,000 young people** to acquire **a vocational education.**

Every **forest** that is protected and sustainably managed is good for the climate. In the past **10 years**, GIZ helped to **protect forest areas 150 times the size** of Germany's forest area.

With support from GIZ, in the past 10 years some **three million people** worldwide have received access to electricity for the first time, and some **10 million** others now have energy-saving cooking appliances.

With support from GIZ, around **one million farmers** around the world have increased their incomes since 2010.

With our support over the past three years, over **100 million people** have received **health insurance coverage** – something we often take for granted – for the first time ever.



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