



PROJECT EVALUATION – A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Part One: Building Evaluation into Project Planning

The purpose and principles of evaluation

Project evaluation has three main purposes:

- To assess whether project objectives have been achieved – especially the outcomes for individuals, groups or communities
- To find out how and why things have worked (or not)
- To provide insights and information for learning and development

With any project evaluation, there are some key principles to keep in mind. These are the 4 P's:

Evaluation needs to be:

- **Part of Project Planning:** integral to your project planning and development – not an afterthought
- **Participatory:** involving the people who the project matters to (your stakeholders)
- **Practical:** providing some practical learning for your project. For example, it is not just about what works – it's also about how and why things work (or don't) and what can be learned from that

- **Proportionate:** the scale of your evaluation needs to fit with the scale of your project. You shouldn't spend more time evaluating than doing!

Six steps to evaluation and learning

This chapter provides a framework for building evaluation into project planning. It draws on a number of models, in particular, theory of change¹ and realistic evaluation.²

The framework is based around **6 steps:**

- 1. Clarifying your current position and your ultimate goal:** This involves asking where are we now and where do we want to be? What are the issues we are seeking to address? What are the big changes we want to make through our project?
- 2. Setting out the outcomes you want to achieve:** This involves asking what will be different for the people we work with if we are successful? What other changes will be seen?
- 3. Planning the activities needed to achieve your outcomes:** This involves asking, what will we need to do to achieve changes? What activities/services will we provide and why do we think they will work?
- 4. Setting out some milestones:** This involves asking, how will we know we're on track? What will be achieved in 12 months and 2 years and 3 years' time?
- 5. Planning what evidence you will collect:** This involves asking, how will we know we're reaching our milestones/outcomes and show others we've reached them? What are our indicators of success?
- 6. Building in time and processes for reflection and learning:** This involves asking, how will we learn from our project's journey? How will we share our learning with others?

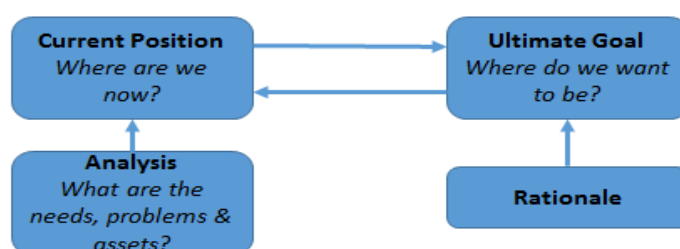
¹ Connell JP, Kubisch AC, Schorr LB, Weiss CH, eds. *New Approaches to Evaluating Community Initiatives: Concepts, Methods & Contexts*. Washington DC: The Aspen Institute 1995

² Pawson R, Tilley N. *Realistic Evaluation*. London: Sage Publications, 1997

These 6 steps do not always happen in order. However, all the steps need to be considered and if you are planning something from scratch with a clean sheet, then it might be helpful to follow the steps from 1 to 6. In the real world 'clean sheets' are quite rare, so the order in which you consider the steps will depend on what has already happened and what can and cannot be changed. As your project develops, things will change and you will certainly want to re-visit the steps in this framework. However, even some retrospective planning can be useful, so if you find yourself plummeted into activity without a clear idea of what you are hoping to achieve, but with an instruction to evaluate your efforts, then this framework is still for you!

STEP 1: Where are you now and where do you want to be?

This step involves analysing the **current position** in terms of the needs or problems your project has been set up to address – but not forgetting the strengths and assets which also exist. At the same time, it involves defining the **ultimate goal** of your project. These two tasks have been merged into one step because they are inextricably linked: there's no point setting a goal without reference to the current position; at the same time, analysis of the current position needs to be in relation to the ultimate goal of the project. In other words: when setting out on a journey, we need to know both where we are now and where we want to go.



Clarifying the current position

This means analysing the problem or need which your project is aiming to address. In carrying out this analysis, the following questions may be helpful:

- What is the need or problem?
- Why do we think it exists?
- Whose need or problem is it (what is our target group or area)?
- What are the strengths and assets which can be drawn on?
- What evidence is there to support our analysis? (e.g. research carried out in the area or elsewhere, consultations, local statistics)
- Who else has an interest in this need or problem—who are the other stakeholders (e.g. are there other projects or services working in this field, are there service user groups with an interest)
- Is our analysis shared by these other stakeholders? (e.g. do the women and girls you plan to work with agree with your analysis of their needs)
- What evidence is available that helps describe our starting point (e.g. is there any information which can be used as a ‘baseline’ for the project?)

Key points

- A lot of information about needs, problems, strengths and assets is in people’s heads – to be of any use for evaluation it has to be drawn out and written down.
- There are many myths about the needs and problems of particular groups and communities. It is important to ensure that your analysis of the current position is supported by the evidence, not just impression and anecdote.
- Needs and problems are generally defined by those stakeholders with most power and influence. Organisations providing services usually have more influence on the definition of need than those who are deemed to have the need. In setting out your current position it is important to be clear about whose need / problem is being analysed and who has had a say in defining it.
- Traditionally, health and welfare services have been based on a ‘deficit model’ which focusses more on what is wrong with individuals, families and communities than what is right about them. An analysis of the current position must include the strengths and resources which exist as well as the needs and problems.

Setting out your Ultimate Goal

This needs to be expressed as a short, clear statement of intent which can be readily understood by all stakeholders. It should capture the project's vision for change.

Key Points

- The goal is intended to be an overarching statement of intent – it should be kept short and simple.
- Avoid qualifying words and phrases such as 'where possible' or 'as appropriate'. These are expressions that are often used to minimise expectations but which are really quite meaningless.
- The ultimate goal needs to be understood and shared by all the key stakeholders of your project. This requires a participatory process and clear communication. If it is formulated by a few managers and concealed in a strategy document nobody reads, it is virtually useless.
- The goal should be aspirational and inspirational but not laughable – it needs to be located in the real world.

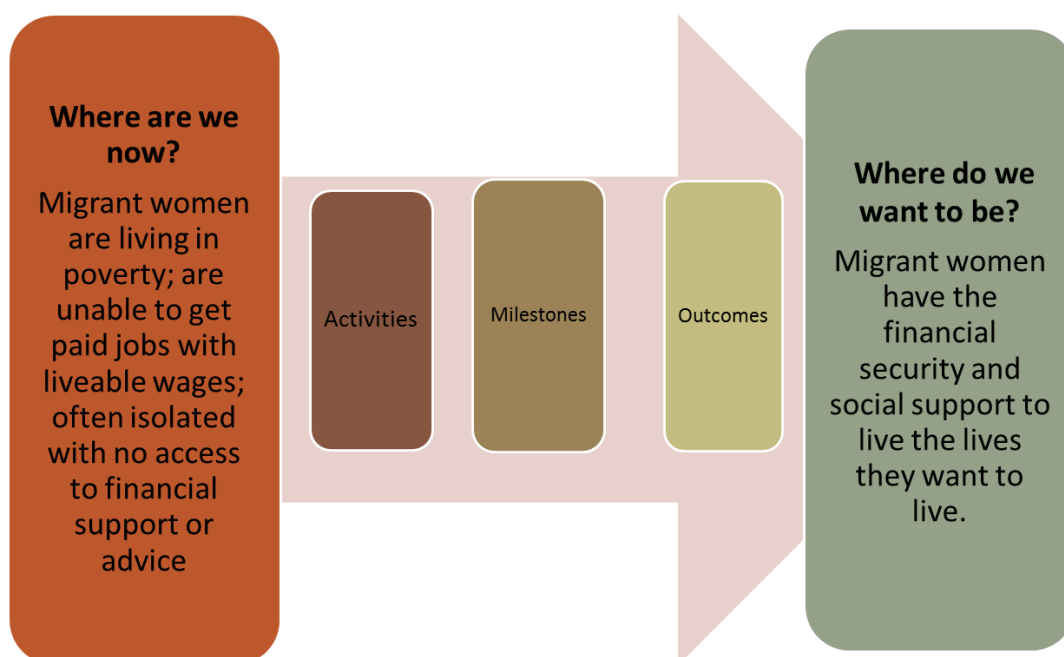
Example: The Obinrin Project for migrant women

Here is a fictional example of a new project being set up for migrant women. The group of women setting up the project got together to analyse the current position. They knew it was important to be clear about the needs they were aiming to meet, and they also wanted to be able to communicate these needs to others – particularly potential funders. They decided to carry out a simple needs analysis and split tasks between them in order to:

- Obtain local authority statistics about migrant women in the area. They also asked local schools and housing associations about the number of migrant families they were aware of
- They called a meeting of local workers to discuss the needs of migrant women in the area – they invited GPs, health visitors, CAB advice workers to come and share their knowledge
- They consulted with migrant women by starting with the women they already knew and getting them to bring others to small discussion groups

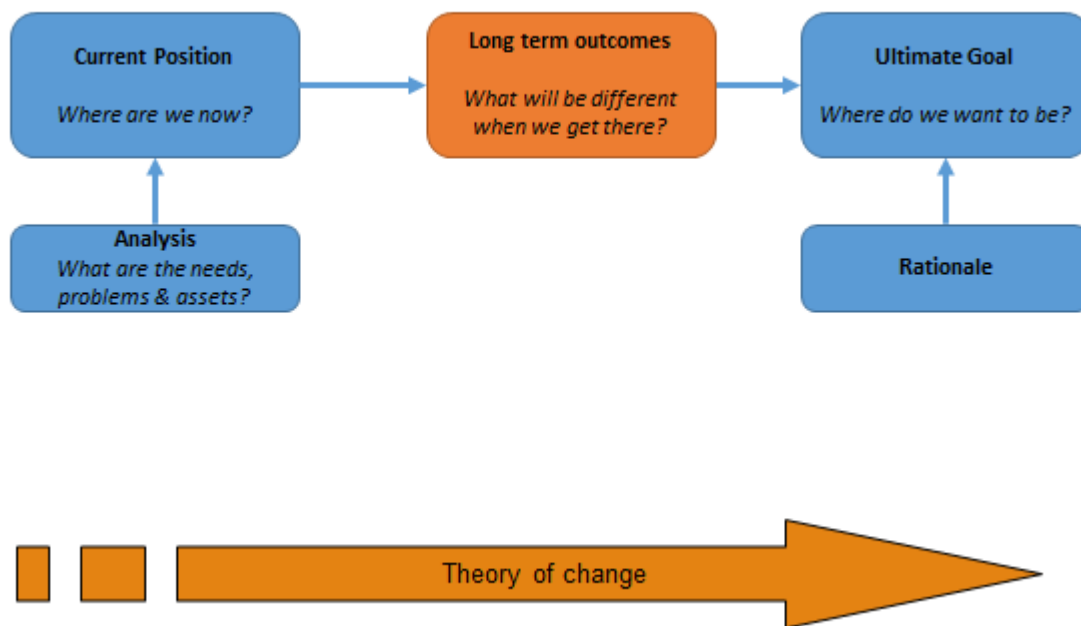
From their needs analysis, they concluded that the main issues for migrant women were poverty and poor employment opportunities. These difficulties were compounded by social isolation and lack of access to financial support and advice. There were lots of other issues in migrant women's lives – but the poverty and financial exclusion was the one that seemed to limit their choices the most.

They therefore decided that the vision for their project was for migrant women to have the financial security and the social support to live the lives they want to live.



STEP 2: What will be different when we get there?

This step involves setting out the **long-term outcomes** which you are seeking to achieve and agreeing a timescale by which they can realistically be achieved. Outcomes are the results you hope to see. They need to be focused on changes in people's lives e.g. in their health and well-being - not just changes in the way services are delivered.



Setting out the long-term outcomes involves asking yourselves and your stakeholders the following questions:

- If we were to be successful in bringing about positive change, what would be different for the people or communities we identified in Step 1?
- When do we realistically believe we can achieve these changes?
- Can we state these changes in terms of clear outcomes?
- Would these be understood and shared as being the most important ones by all stakeholders?

Key points

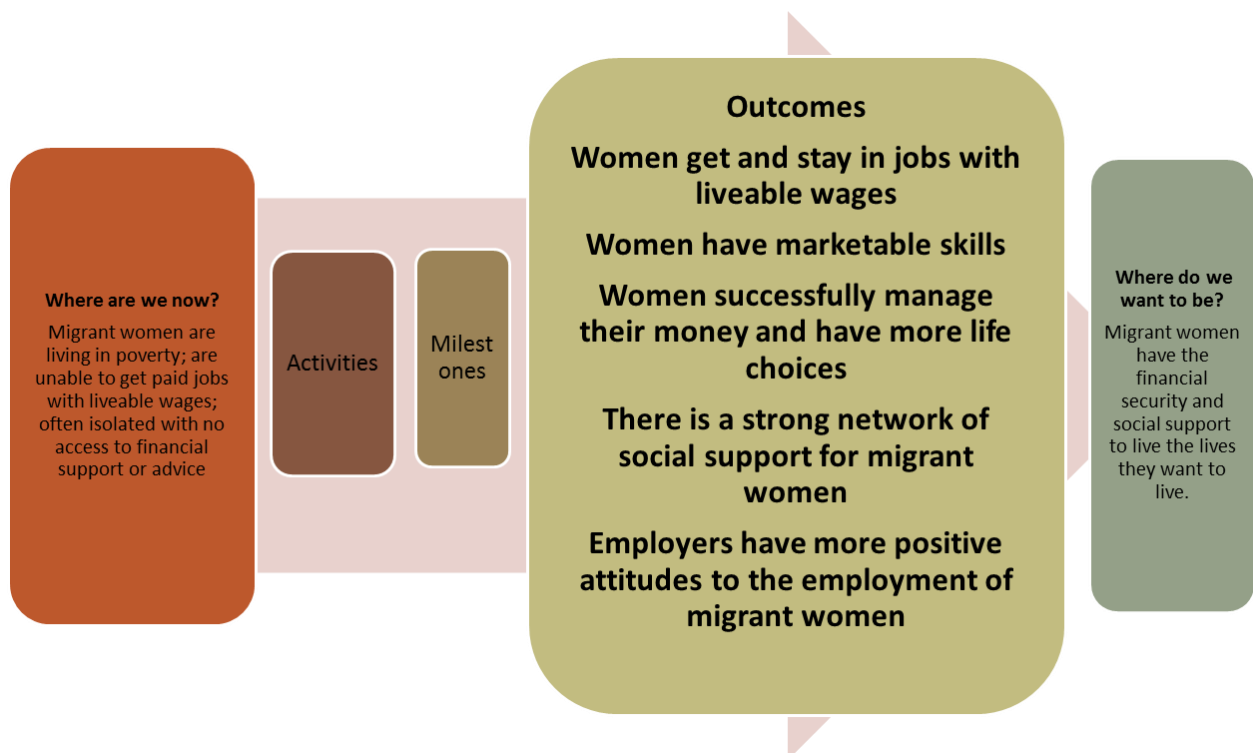
- One of the most common mistakes when setting outcomes is to express them in terms of changes to the way services are delivered or organised. Although these may be important they are only a means by which better outcomes for people may be achieved. Long-term outcomes need to be outcomes for people.
- Setting a realistic timescale is important. If you believe that achieving meaningful change will take 10 years that needs to be made explicit –

even if your project only has two years funding. Pretending you can achieve in two years what will realistically take ten, is doing nobody any favours.

- Outcomes should be clearly linked to the project’s ultimate goal.

Example: The Obinrin Project for migrant women

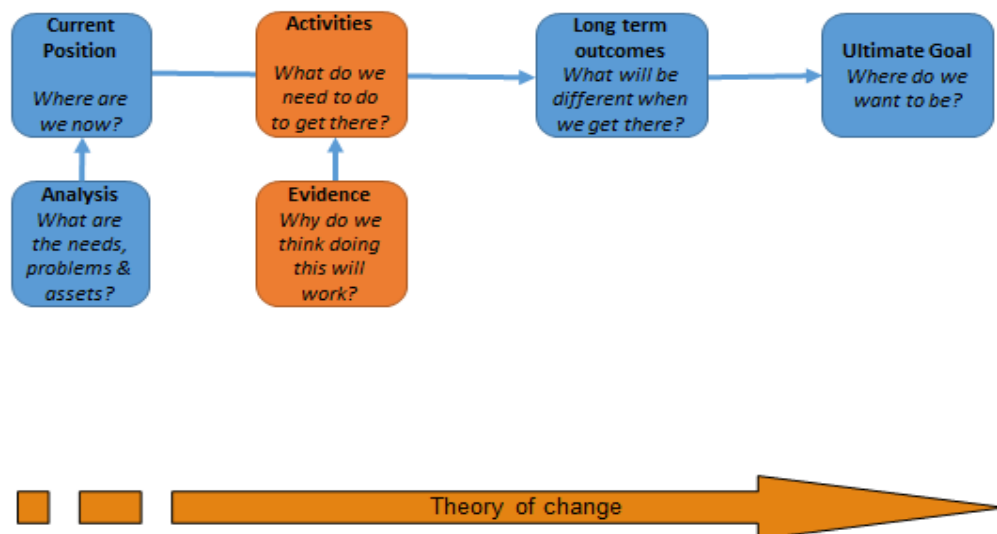
The Obinrin project’s ultimate goal was for migrant women to be able to live the lives they want to live, with financial security and social support central to this. The project identified 5 main outcomes they needed to achieve if this goal was to be met. Four of these were for the women themselves – but one was for local employers who the project identified as critical stakeholders that they needed to get on board.



STEP 3: What will we need to do to get there?

This involves planning the **activities** which you believe will be required to bring about your intended outcomes. This is an important step in assessing whether what you plan to do is likely to contribute to the outcomes you have set. This is where your theory of change really comes in: the activities you identify should

come from your theory of what needs to happen to achieve the changes you are seeking.



This step involves asking the following questions:

- What do we need to do to achieve our outcomes?
- Why do we believe these activities/models/interventions will work in our particular context ('what is our theory of change')?
- Have they been tried before nationally or locally?
- What evidence do we have for their effectiveness?
- Are these activities likely to be acceptable and welcomed by those who are going to be 'on the receiving end'?

Key Points

- Although planning activities is step 3 in this framework, in reality it is often the first thing that is planned. Frequently, service providers and funders have committed themselves to developing a particular kind of service before carrying out a systemic analysis of need and often without an explicit set of outcomes they are trying to achieve. This is not ideal!
- Activities need to be clearly directed at achieving your outcomes. If it's not clear how an activity will contribute to an outcome it would be appropriate to question whether you should be doing it at all.

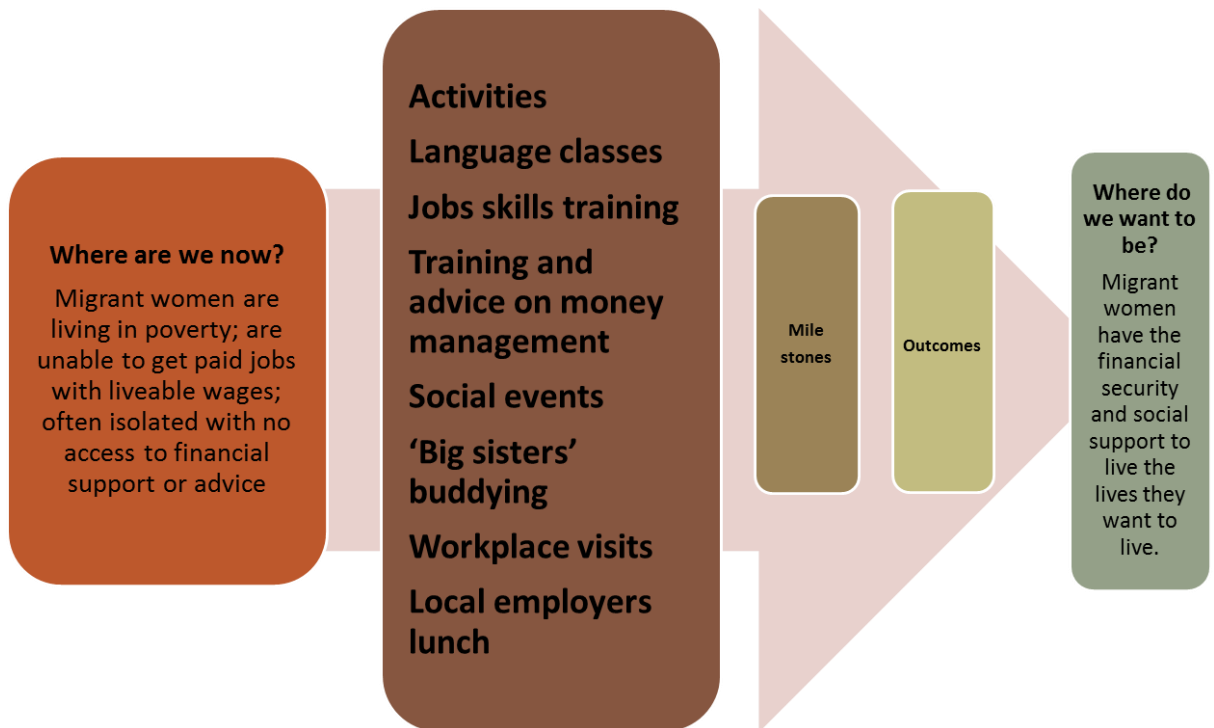
- In planning activities it makes sense to use the available evidence for what works. Many interventions to improve people's well-being are not evidence-based. This may be because existing evidence is not routinely used by planners, or because reliable evidence of effectiveness does not exist, or the available evidence is not applicable to the local context.
- Where the evidence for a planned intervention is uncertain, it is particularly important to build in a means of evaluating its effects.
- Activities are frequently planned by service providers with relatively little input by those likely to be on the receiving end. People who use facilities and services have expertise which needs to be central in planning and designing projects.

The Obinrin project example

The women setting up the Obinrin project had lots of ideas about things they could potentially do – but they also wanted to do those things that would be most effective with their limited resources. There was some discussion about whether they should be providing language classes given that there was a local college teaching ESL courses. However, migrant women told them how they had struggled with these classes where there were many men and only a few women. Some women had very traumatic histories and struggled to concentrate – their particular learning support needs were not being met in the college context.

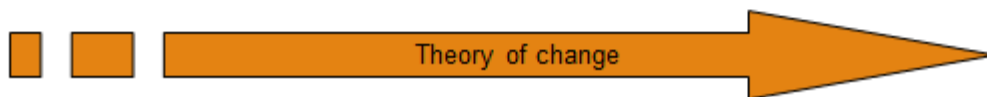
Another area which was much debated was how to engage employers. Again, it was women themselves that felt that by cooking a lunch they could both demonstrate their talents and create an opportunity to meet employers informally and on their own terms. The project realised that this was an 'untested' approach to employer engagement so were very interested in evaluating the impact of the lunches.

Example: The Obinrin Project for migrant women



STEP 4: What milestones will we need to reach at each stage of the journey?

This step involves setting out the interim outcomes which you expect to have achieved at intervals on your journey towards your ultimate goal. These might include some 'early wins' – things which can be achieved in the shorter term.



Setting milestones involves asking the following questions:

- If we are to achieve the long-term outcomes we identified at Step 2, what will we need to have achieved at some intermediate points on our journey?
- At what time points is it important and reasonable to have milestones in place? Do they fit with your reporting requirements? E.g. to produce an annual report.
- Do these milestones make sense to key stakeholders?

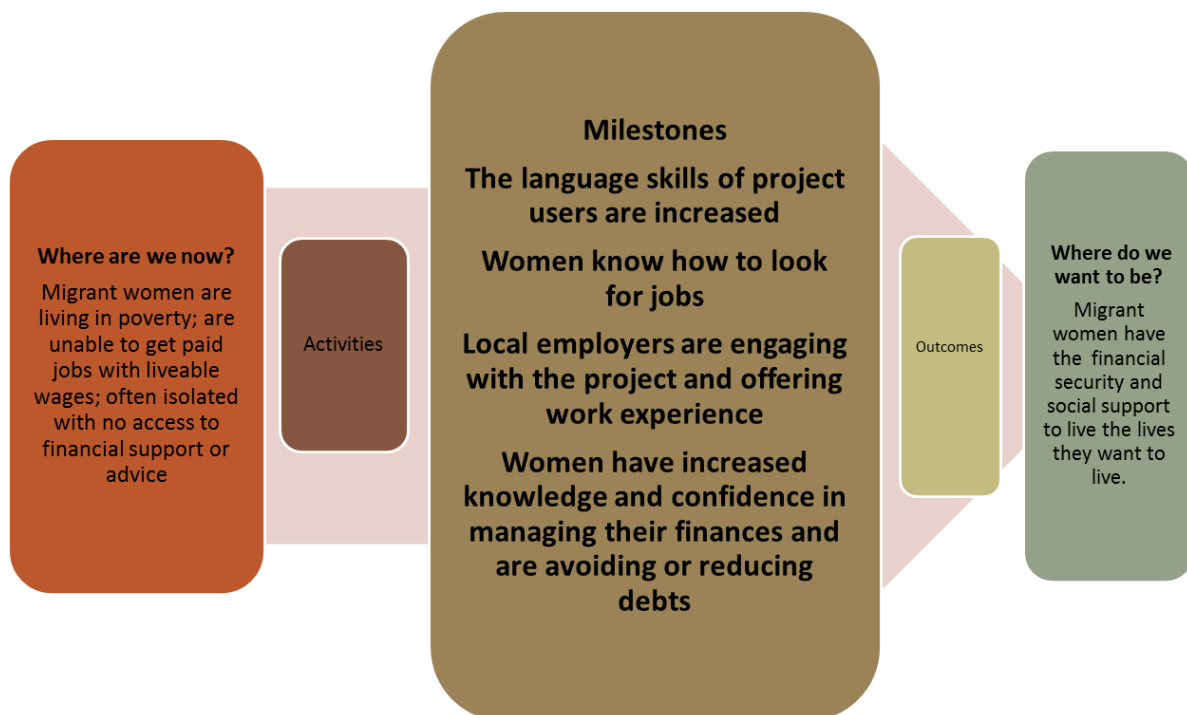
Key Points

- While long-term outcomes should represent improvements in the lives people or communities, milestones are more likely to be a mixture of people-focused changes and service-focused changes. E.g. they might include things the project has to have in place, such as staff or training, in order to deliver its activities.
- It is important to be clear about timescales for achieving milestones. If you have set your long-term outcomes to be achieved by year 5, you need to be clear what milestones you will need to achieve by year 4, by year 2, by year 1.

- Establishing milestones is particularly important if your project is short-term funded and you hope to use evaluation to support further funding bids. You should be able to demonstrate that you have achieved your planned outcomes for the first two years and are therefore on target to achieve long-term outcomes if funding is continued.

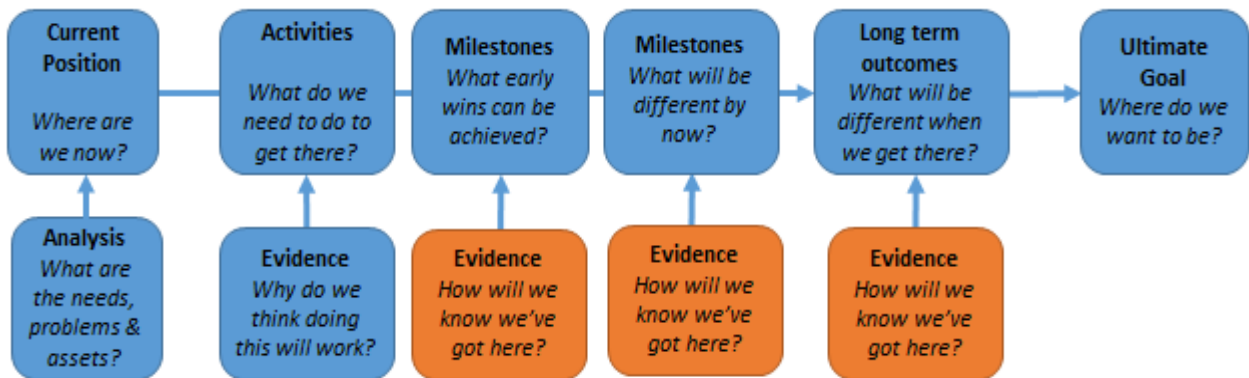
Example: The Obinrin Project for migrant women

The project gained funding for three years but needs to provide a report on progress after 18 months. They decided that the milestones below could reasonably be achieved in this period and would provide a good indication that they were on track to achieve their long-term outcomes.



STEP 5 – How will we know when we've reached our outcomes and how can we show others that we've reached them?

This step involves setting out **evidence** you will need to assess whether or not you are achieving your outcomes:



Identifying the evidence you need involves asking the following questions:

- How will we know whether we are achieving our outcomes?
- What will be different at each stage of our journey if we're being successful?
- What will show that we have done the things we said we'd do?
- Who is our target audience for this evidence? What will they be most interested in knowing?
- What quantitative evidence might there be to demonstrate achievement?
- What qualitative evidence might there be to demonstrate achievement?
- How will we build the collection of this evidence into our planning?
- How can we involve all the key stakeholders in collecting this evidence?
- What tools might be most appropriate for collecting this evidence?
- What do we need to be doing now to ensure that we have systems for collecting this evidence?

Key points

- Some evidence is easier to collect than others. This can make it tempting to collect what is ‘collectable’ regardless of how useful it might be.
- In attempting to demonstrate a link between interventions and outcomes some kinds of evidence will be more convincing than others. Good evaluation uses the best possible evidence available in the circumstances and is honest about what it can and cannot prove.
- Systems for collecting evidence should complement the practice of the project rather than being an additional burden. What recording systems already exist and can any of these also be used for evaluation purposes?
- There is a variety of methods and tools which can be used to collect evaluative information. Which you use will depend on the sort of information you are trying to collect and from whom. Questionnaires are not the only option!

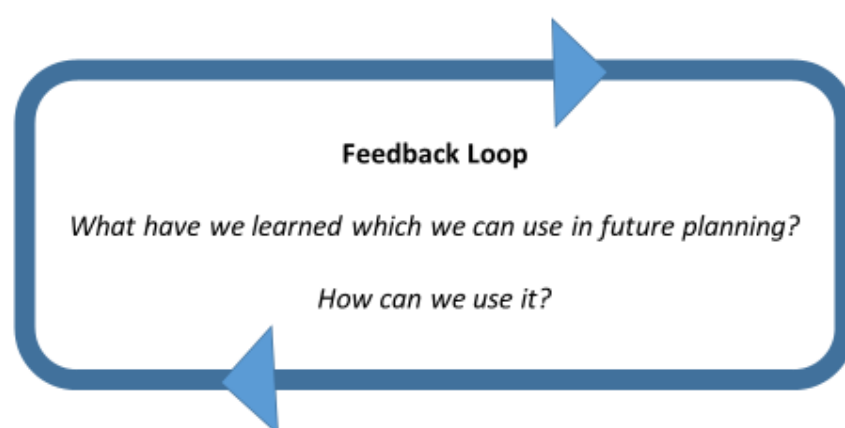
Example: The Obinrin Project for migrant women

Milestones	Evidence
The language skills of project users are increased	Assessment of language skills administered by the teacher at the start of courses and then every term.
Women know how to look for jobs	Women’s self-report. Number of applications submitted and interviews achieved.
Local employers are engaging with the project and offering work experience	Number of work experience placements offered. Numbers attending employers’ lunches. Feedback from employers – survey conducted.
Women have increased knowledge and confidence in managing their finances and are avoiding or reducing debts	Financial review of individual s at baseline and changes in a) numbers receiving benefit entitlement b) reductions in debt/borrowing. Case studies in which women describe the changes for themselves.

There is more detail on collecting evidence in part 2 of this guide.

STEP 6 – How will we learn from our experiences along the way?

This step involves making sure that there is a **feedback loop** at every stage of your planning and evaluation process.



Step 6 involves asking the following questions:

- Have we built into our planning regular reviews involving all our stakeholders?
- Are we open to learning from our mistakes as well as our successes?
- Are we willing to spell out the assumptions implicit in our plans and test them against the evidence?
- If successful, what were the factors that made an approach work in our particular context?
- If less successful than we'd hoped, what were the factors which limited success in our particular context?
- Has our project worked better for some people than for others? Why was this? What needs to be different to meet the needs of different groups?
- Are there implications for wider policy and practice?
- How will we share what we've learned with others?

Key points

- This is arguably the most important part of any planning and evaluation process, yet probably the most frequently overlooked.
- There is no point in collecting evaluative information unless we are willing to use it to inform future planning. It is worth having an honest discussion with partner agencies about this from the beginning.
- Sometimes organisational planning processes mitigate against learning. If plans are set in stone so that a course of action cannot be changed once embarked upon, then evaluation is almost pointless. Flexibility in planning implies flexibility in resource management.
- There is a variety of ways of sharing learning. Which approaches you use should depend on the sort of information you are trying to share and with whom.