Credit: Perdiansyah

HOW TO GUIDE

How to develop SMART Indicators

A practical guide for Biodiversity Challenge Funds (BCFs) projects and applicants.

Specific
Measurable
Achievable
Relevant
Timebound

Introduction

This guide has been developed to help projects funded under the Biodiversity Challenge Funds (**Darwin Initiative**, **Illegal Wildlife Trade (IWT) Challenge Fund**, and **Darwin Plus**) develop indicators that are SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timebound. These indicators will help you effectively monitor and evaluate the Outputs and Outcome of your project.

What are SMART Indicators?

The SMART framework serves as a helpful checklist to ensure your Project Indicators[1], particularly those included in logical frameworks (logframes), are clear and able to measure progress accurately. Below is an overview of each aspect of SMART to consider when developing your project indicators.

[1] Project Indicators are the criteria that are used to measure progress towards the achievement of Outputs and Outcomes. After developing your results chain and theory of change, you will have a better idea of what Project Indicators you will need to ascertain whether, and to what extent, these project objectives have been achieved. Within BCFs-related reporting, we ask that you report against both Project Indicators and Standard Indicators For more information please refer to the BCFs Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Guidance on the MEL resource page on each fund's website, linked above.

Credit: Justin Grubb

Specific

Indicators should be simple and clearly defined, with sufficient detail to ensure that change can be shown using supporting evidence – known as Means of Verification[2].

Key Questions:

- What exactly do we want to achieve?
- Who is involved?
- Where will this take place?
- Why is this important?

Examples:

Output	Indicator:	Means of Verification:
Frontline enforcement staff have practical skills to identify priority species.	At least 30 customs officers (≥40% women) at Border Posts A & B correctly identify 10 priority species within 8 weeks of training.	Training attendance list, test papers and scores, signed test records.

In this indicator, it specifically names *who* (customs officers), *where* (two Border posts – A & B), *what* (identifying species), and *how it is evidenced* (test papers and scores), avoiding vague phrases like "capacity strengthened."

Outcome	Indicator:	Means of Verification:
Stakeholders who attended training of trainers workshop go on to train other staff in their organisation.	70% of participants who attended the training of trainers workshop (disaggregated by gender) *lead* workshops to train staff in their organisation.	Attendance sheets of workshops including facilitator and list of participants.

In this example, only participants who lead workshops within their own organisation are counted. Those leading training in other organisations, which may not be involved in conservation, or participants in a supportive role during workshops, are not included. This approach is used to ensure that the data collected aligns with the project's specific measurement requirements.

Measurable

Indicators should be observable and capable of being tracked over time.

Key Questions:

- How will we measure progress?
- What tools or methods will we use to collect this data?

Example:

Outcome	Indicator:	Means of Verification:
Ministry staff use the knowledge gained from training to improve conservation policy.	40 ministry staff (disaggregated by gender) *report using* the knowledge gained by end of project.	Post training surveys.

In this example, the indicator would be based on what the ministry staff share in their reports - something that is possible to measure. A different indicator could be to count the number of changes in a policy that can be attributed to the training that these ministry staff have undertaken. Attribution is difficult to measure and prove as a number of factors and people are involved in developing policies. This is why the project should focus on explaining in its reporting / theory of change *how* it is contributing, being specific about the role that it has, and selecting indicators it has control over.

[2] Sources of information and methods used to verify progress against the indicators. For more information, please refer to section 2.3.2 in the BCFs MEL Guidance.

Credit: S. Sarkis

Achievable

Indicators should be realistic and attainable within the scope of the project.

Key Questions:

- Is this goal achievable with the time and resources we have?
- Are there any constraints that might hinder our progress?

Example:

Output	Indicator:	Means of Verification:
Diversified, nature-positive livelihoods reduce economic reliance on environmentally harmful activities in buffer villages.	By the end of Season 2, ≥80% of 120 participating households produce ≥10 kg of certified honey, and ≥70% record ≥£20 / month net income from sales via the cooperative.	Cooperative sales records, household income diaries, random spot-checks, certification records; data collection plan details frequency / responsibility.

In this example, target levels are modest, timebound within project scope, and supported by plausible data sources. This ensures realistic targets within the given resources, timeframe, and constraints. Another indicator may have larger targets, but not be realistic given the time and resource limitations of the project. This may lead to the project to be viewed as more ambitious at the application stage, but it increases the risk of the project not reaching its targets.

Relevant

Indicators should directly relate to the project's goals and objectives.

Key Questions:

- Does this indicator directly relate to our project's objectives?
- Will achieving this indicator contribute to our overall goal?
- Is the indicator relevant for the context the project is working in?

Example:

Outcome	Indicator:	Means of Verification:
Local communities help protect endangered species.	By Year 2, at least 10 community patrol groups carry out monthly patrols and report any illegal hunting in the reserve.	Patrol group reports, monthly patrol logs, photos with GPS, summary report.

This indicator is directly tied to the overarching project goal of protecting endangered species and represents tangible progress. It reflects the formation and active engagement of community patrol groups, rather than just documenting meetings or intentions. It demonstrates that concrete actions are being taken at the local level, with clear evidence such as monthly patrols and reporting on illegal hunting activities in the reserve. By focusing on measurable and visible outcomes, this indicator helps ensure that the project's objectives are being addressed in theory and implemented through ongoing, practical efforts in the field.

Timebound

Indicators should have a clear timeframe for achievement.

Key Questions:

- When do we want to achieve this goal?
- What are the deadlines for each milestone?

Example:

Outcome	Indicator:	Means of Verification:
National climate adaptation policy incorporates biodiversity safeguards and targets to ensure ecosystem resilience.	By Q4 2026, two national climate adaptation policies include biodiversity objectives. Draft biodiversity integration guidelines submitted by Q4 2025.	Official directive, dated memos, registry of recipients.

This example demonstrates how an indicator should include the desired outcome and explicit deadlines and interim milestones. This clarifies exactly when progress should be evident and what forms of evidence will be used to confirm that progress. By specifying the end goal and the steps along the way, project teams can better track implementation in a transparent way. This structured approach also helps ensure that achievements and challenges are documented in a way that can be independently verified, and supports continuous improvement over the project lifecycle. All indicators should be timebound within the lifetime of the project.

Key takeaway

Developing SMART indicators is crucial for the successful monitoring and evaluation of your project. By following the SMART framework, you can create clear, measurable, and achievable indicators that will help you track your progress and achieve your project goals.

Credit: P. Cannon