

Somebody has already defined this

Where the published definitions live, a rule for choosing between adopting one and writing your own, and how to document a departure so your number stays comparable.

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Lesson 6 of 8

Indicator Design and the LogFrame — Counting people

What this lesson covers

- The question to ask before writing a definition
- Where the definitions live
- Adopt, adapt, or invent
- Documenting a departure
- Map to the standard where you can
- Comparability is the whole point
- SDG tiers, and what they tell you
- When the standard is wrong for you
- What comes next

The question to ask before writing a definition

- Almost every indicator this sector reports has already been defined by somebody with more time, more consultation and more scrutiny than you will get.

Where the definitions live

Source	Covers	Note
WHO	Growth standards, immunisation, disease surveillance case definitions	The growth standards are the authority for anthropometry, full stop
UNICEF	Child protection, WASH, education, nutrition indicator definitions	Usually the most operationally detailed
Sphere	Minimum standards and their indicators across humanitarian sectors	Gives thresholds, not just definitions
The SDG framework	231 global indicators with metadata sheets	The metadata sheet is a reference sheet; read it as a model
IPC	Acute food insecurity and acute malnutrition classification	Defines the evidence, not just the indicator
SMART	Nutrition survey methodology and plausibility criteria	Defines how the data is collected, which is half the definition
JMP	Water, sanitation and hygiene service ladders	The ladders are indicator definitions in disguise
The cluster	Whatever the response is	Least stable, most immediately

Adopt, adapt, or invent

- Adopt — when a standard definition exists and you can compute it
- Adapt — when the standard definition exists but you genuinely cannot compute it, usually because a data element is. . .
- Invent — only when the thing you need to measure is specific to your programme and nobody else measures it

Documenting a departure — Example

Standard	WHO/UNICEF, penta3 coverage (WUENIC methodology)
Departure	Denominator uses MoH facility catchment estimates rather than UN WPP surviving infants. Numerator restricted to facilities reporting in the month, where the standard uses all facilities with non-reporters imputed from the previous year.
Effect	Our figure is a lower bound relative to the standard. On 2024 data the difference is largest in August, where reporting completeness was 29%.
Comparable to	Other districts using the same MoH denominators. Not directly comparable to WUENIC national estimates.

Map to the standard where you can — In Python

```
DEFINITIONS = {  
    "local_gam_muac": lambda d: (d["muac_mm"] < 125) | (d["oedema"] == True),  
    "who_gam_muac_only": lambda d: d["muac_mm"] < 125,  
}  
  
for name, rule in DEFINITIONS.items():  
    eligible = d = muac[muac["muac_mm"].notna()]  
    print(f"{name:22} {rule(d).sum() / len(eligible):.2%}  (n={len(eligible)})")
```

Map to the standard where you can — In R

```
muac |>
  filter(!is.na(muac_mm)) |>
  summarise(
    local_gam_muac      = mean(muac_mm < 125 | oedema),
    who_gam_muac_only = mean(muac_mm < 125),
    n = n()
  )
```

Comparability is the whole point

- **Against yourself, over time.** A definition changed between rounds breaks the series, and the break is invisible. . .
- **Against your neighbours.** Cluster reporting aggregates partner figures. A partner using a different denominator. . .
- **Against the threshold that triggers action.** IPC phases, Sphere minimum standards and the 15% GAM emergency. . .

SDG tiers, and what they tell you

- **Tier 1** — definition agreed, data regularly produced by most countries.
- **Tier 2** — definition agreed, data not regularly produced.
- **Tier 3** — no agreed definition yet. (*Formally retired as a tier, but the situation it described is everywhere.*)

When the standard is wrong for you

- The **age band** does not match your programme. A standard defined for under-fives in a programme serving 6 to 23. . .
- The **recall period** does not fit the context. A seven-day food consumption recall in a context with a fortnightly. . .
- The **denominator is unavailable**, and the standard assumes a census that does not exist for your area.

When the standard is wrong for you

Adopting a standard definition is not a loss of analytical independence. It is what makes your number legible to everyone who has to act on it.

What comes next

- You have a definition, a denominator and a standard to compare it against.

Read the full lesson, with runnable code

[https://data-analysis.cassion.dev/courses/indicator-design-logframe/
indicators-06-standard-indicator-sets](https://data-analysis.cassion.dev/courses/indicator-design-logframe/indicators-06-standard-indicator-sets)