

# The RBF Approach to Evaluating Impact

Elizabeth Campbell and Hope Lyons

August 2021 (revised)

---

## INTRODUCTION

The Fund's approach to program impact assessment is rooted in two simple yet fundamental questions: ***Are we making a difference? How do we know?***

Our grantmaking and program activities support our mission to advance social change that contributes to a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world. The Fund is active globally, nationally, and locally in its home city of New York. Grantmaking is organized into eight portfolios addressing significant challenges in the fields of sustainable development, democratic practice, and peacebuilding in the United States, selected [pivotal places](#), and globally. (See Appendix I for current RBF Program Architecture.) Grantmaking is designed to address large scale, systemic challenges, and as such, we take the long view in both grantmaking and assessment of programmatic impact.

**The Fund defines program impact as discernable changes in understanding, behavior, capacity, public engagement, or public policy that demonstrate program strategies are contributing to the realization of program goals.**

Our approach to evaluating impact draws on the following components:

- **Program Guidelines**, approved by the board of trustees, that present each program's goal and strategies, with **Indicators of Progress** that articulate how we hope and expect change in our fields of funding will manifest
- Ongoing **grant monitoring and field engagement** to understand issues, progress, challenges, and opportunities for strategic support in the field
- Annual reviews of **evidence of progress** to assess and document where change is occurring and how our grantmaking is contributing to progress, with a biennial presentation to the trustees
- **Program Reviews** approximately every five years to understand how program guidelines are holding up in the evolving contexts in which we fund and if any mid-course corrections are needed
- **Impact Assessments**, conducted by external consultants, of particular lines of work as strategies mature

The Fund has a longstanding commitment to evaluating impact. In 2012, we sought to bring more rigor and clarity to our work in this regard and to build attention to impact more explicitly into a variety of institutional processes. Staff have since worked with this approach, adapting it to changing institutional needs and lessons learned as needed. Evaluating impact has become embedded in our everyday activities and informs grantmaking on an ongoing basis.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

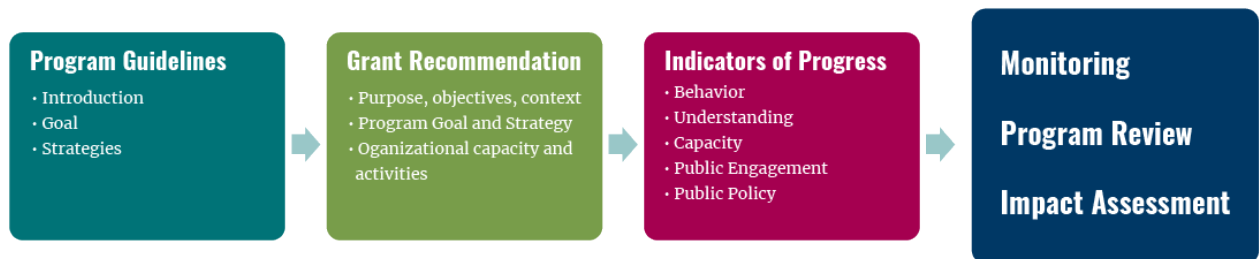
The following principles guide our approach to evaluating impact. They were initially developed by a joint board and staff committee in 2012 and have held true, serving as guideposts for the Fund's evaluation efforts.

- The Fund's approach is **rooted in its mission and program goals**; it reflects and supports the RBF grantmaking approach as captured in [the program statement](#). Impact evaluation efforts must be **flexible enough to work across our eight program portfolios** and their respective evolving contexts.

- Given the nature of the RBF’s grantmaking, **a wide range of indicators and information** is needed to understand the impact of its support on a field or issue. Grantmaking is designed to contribute to the achievement of long-term goals and to make a lasting impact; as such, we take the **long view**, with interim review of near and medium-term progress, when assessing program impact.
- Our approach to evaluating impact is **action oriented**. It enables staff and trustees to better understand the effectiveness of our grantmaking in light of the contexts in which our grantees are working and to adjust grantmaking as necessary.
- Impact assessment efforts focus on the **contribution of our grantmaking**. Staff recognize that, as funders, we support organizations that receive funding from other sources and that are usually working alongside other organizations and actors within a field; as such, it is difficult to attribute a particular change directly to our funding.
- The impact assessment process should **add value to Fund and grantee work**, not create unnecessary administrative and financial burdens for the Fund, our staff, grantees, or partners.
- We are committed to **sharing what we are learning** with grantees, partners in our fields of funding, and the general public, as long as doing so does not jeopardize the work of grantees.

## EVALUATION BUILDING BLOCKS

Figure 1: Components of the RBF Evaluation Approach



### 1. Program Guidelines: What We Fund and Why

**Program Guidelines** are the board-approved articulation of **the Fund’s vision for its programs and grantmaking**. They communicate the Fund’s grantmaking focus to external audiences and provide parameters to staff on the areas in which they can develop and recommend grants.

The guidelines for each program include an **introduction** that presents the Fund’s distinct point of view, including a summary of our understanding of the context and our areas of focus within the field or geographic area, to ground the program in the ideas that motivate our interest.

Each program establishes **an ambitious goal** that presents our aspirations over the long term, **with three to four strategies** that the Fund will support to achieve progress toward the program goal. In effect, each program’s guidelines convey its **theory of change**: how we believe the RBF is best positioned to contribute to a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world (goal) and the work we will fund to do so (strategies).

## 2. Grant Recommendations: Rationale for Funding

Grant recommendations are internal memoranda that include the objectives of the grant along with a description of the work to be supported and the grantee organization's role in the field and capacity. They also include a discussion of how the proposed grant relates to the context and the Fund's program strategies.

## 3. Indicators of Progress: The Change We Hope and Expect to See

The **indicators of progress** identify anticipated **changes in understanding, behavior, capacity, public engagement, or public policy** that would demonstrate that program strategies are contributing to realizing program goals.<sup>1</sup> Indicators of progress are established for each strategy.

Since our work generally addresses longstanding and deeply rooted problems, we understand that it can take many years for the intended impact to come to fruition; we also believe that there will be developments that will signal progress is being made over the short and medium term.

The indicators of progress are for internal reference and are not intended to be an exhaustive list of all the changes we hope to see in the field. Indicators may be **qualitative or quantitative**; however, while quantitative indicators may be useful in some instances, we have found that it is often difficult to quantify results related to our organizing, advocacy, and public policy-focused grantmaking.

The chart below offers definitions of the types of changes staff envision, along with a sampling of indicators of progress drawn from our current portfolios. In practice, staff have found that some developments can indicate multiple types of change. For example, an anticipated development may be an indicator of both new understanding and new public policy. The point of this guidance on indicators is to prompt thinking rather than to establish precisely what type of change is envisioned.

---

<sup>1</sup> Definitions of change and indicators largely drawn from the Women's Funding Network, "Making the Case: Five Indicators of Social Change."

Figure 2. Indicators of Progress: Types and Definitions

Indicator Focus	Definition	Sample Indicators
<b>Behavior</b>	People and institutions change their practices.	Increased levels of local giving to civil society. <b>(Western Balkans)</b>
<b>Capacity</b>	Organizations are better equipped to act and fulfill their missions; new institutions are in place to inform and advance debates or experiment with solutions in a field.	Chinese banks and financial institutions improve the effectiveness of their review of the impact of Chinese overseas investments. <b>(China)</b>
<b>Public Engagement</b>	People and institutions take action around issues at a public level to shape society.	New fossil fuel infrastructure in North America continues to be blocked. <b>(Sustainable Development)</b>
<b>Public Policy</b>	Institutional and/or public policy or practice has changed.	Policymaking addresses root causes of conflict, including arms industry, corruption, and corporate interest. <b>(Peacebuilding)</b>
<b>Understanding</b>	The issue is defined and understood differently.	Public understanding of spending on elections as corrupting is among top five issues in public interest polling. <b>(Democratic Practice – U.S.)</b>

#### 4. Evaluation: How We Know Funding Is Having an Impact

The Fund’s grantmaking is formally evaluated at the level of program portfolios. Evaluation efforts consider the impact of a set of grants, as well as other activities such as convening (including conferences organized at The Pocantico Center) and collaborations with other donors. Robust grant coding and data management during the grant recommendation and review process are an essential input for our evaluation activities. While the Fund does not dictate how grantees should evaluate their work, our required reporting asks for their reflections on the following questions:

- What progress has been made toward achieving the goals of the organization/project? Please highlight progress on the grant objectives as appropriate.
- Were the grant funds expended in the way that you anticipated when the grant was requested? What other funders have contributed to this organization/project? Have any new funders come on board after the RBF’s grant was awarded?
- What do you consider to be the impact and value of this work? What is your overall assessment of the grant to date?
- What lessons are being learned? What obstacles were encountered, and how have you overcome them?

Within each program portfolio, evaluation activities occur on a regular basis and include **monitoring, Program Reviews, and Impact Assessments.**

**Monitoring** is the ongoing process of collecting information on grantee performance during a grant through site visits, informal communications, and other opportunities to follow grantee work, as well as on developments within a field through conferences, reading, and communication with other partners.

Monitoring includes **grant reporting**, as well as program staff **engagement with grantees and in the fields** in which they are active. Close communication with grantees allows program staff to assess progress on an ongoing basis and to identify aspects of funded activity that are making positive contributions to advancing program strategies and realizing program goals. The indicators of progress provide staff with a roadmap for this activity. RBF staff stay abreast of developments in their fields and gather information to determine if ideas, practices, and social movements are gaining momentum or acceptance. Based on all this information, staff recommend that grants be renewed, discontinued, or complemented with related grants, convenings, or other activities.

Program teams gather **evidence of progress**—changes and developments to which grantee work has contributed that staff observe in the field or learn of directly from grantees—annually to document progress toward achieving the indicators of progress. The purpose of this exercise is to capture **evidence that speaks to impact—durable changes in behavior, understanding, capacity, public engagement, and public policy**. Wherever possible, staff gather links to reports, articles, and other sources that capture and corroborate impact. This process is for internal discussion purposes; it is used for annual conversations with senior management and is reviewed by the board on a biennial basis. It also serves as a key input for future Program Reviews and Impact Assessments.

Considering the long-term nature of social change, we understand that **there will not always be significant progress to report on all strategies every year**. Many activities that grantmaking supports set the stage for real progress and durable impact—important meetings held, reports issued, and initiatives launched, and organizational capacity added (e.g., new staff hired, partnerships forged, systems put in place). These developments are certainly part of the program team's monitoring but are not reflected in the evidence of progress documentation. We also recognize that grantee organizations may contribute to unanticipated but important progress. In our reporting, we create space for program staff to present additional relevant evidence of progress. See Appendix II for sample reporting template.

**Program Reviews** examine a program's goal and strategies in light of the evolving context. They allow staff and trustees to reflect on the program's overall direction and preliminary indications of impact and to make midcourse corrections as needed.

Program Reviews are conducted every three to five years. They draw on grantee reports as well as field engagement, **data from the Fund's grants management system** (GivingData), and evidence of progress. Program Reviews provide an opportunity for staff to **revise indicators of progress** in response to changes in context, strategy refinements, or other board-approved changes in program direction.

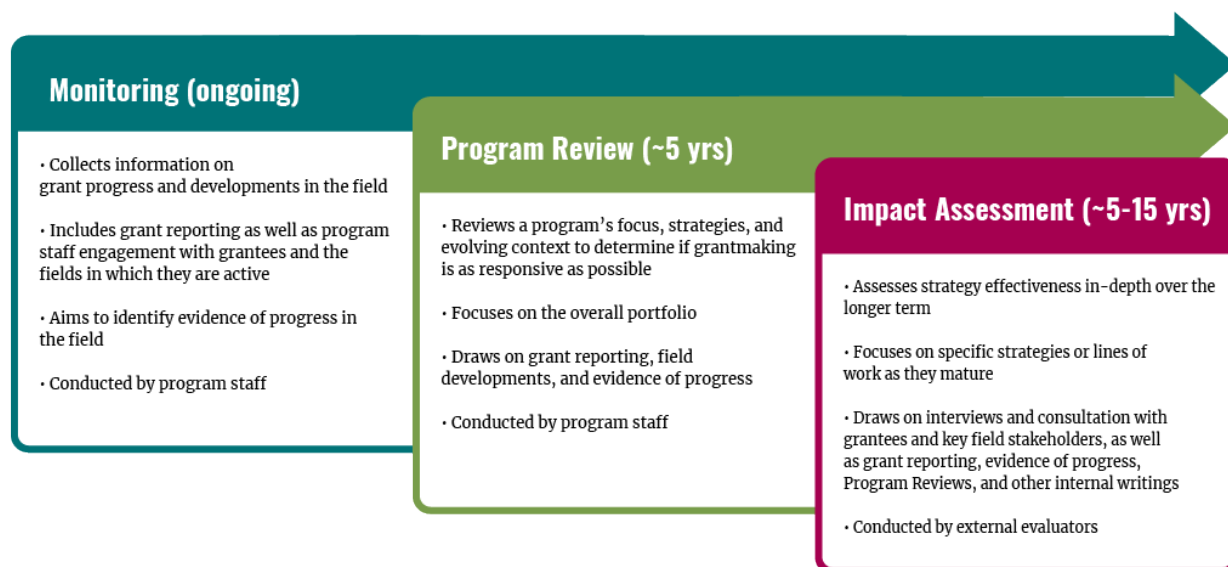
Our experience has shown that, given their breadth and purpose, Program Reviews are most effectively completed by staff. Program Reviews are presented in a variety of formats ranging from a formal written memo to a more visual presentation using PowerPoint, depending on a particular program's current read of the field, how the Fund's grantmaking has taken shape, and evidence of its impact.

**Impact Assessments** are in-depth reviews of strategy effectiveness over the longer term. They focus on the contribution of grantees and other programmatic activities to advancing specific

strategies as they mature (five to 15 years). Selected strategies that warrant an Impact Assessment are determined by the executive vice president for programs and program teams or by suggestion of the president or the board.

Impact Assessments follow the same general outline as Program Reviews but focus on a single strategy or line of work over a longer period. They are generally carried out by external consultants. Consultants draw on the Fund’s internal information on grantmaking activities (recommendation memos, analyses of grant-related data drawn from GivingData, evidence of progress) and grantee reports. They also conduct interviews with grantees, partners, and sector leaders, as well as with individuals not as engaged with the program team, to get a wide range of perspectives on progress and the impact of the grantmaking.

Figure 3. Evaluation: Key Elements



## STAFFING, AUDIENCE, AND TIMING

### Staffing

We are committed to integrating evaluation and learning into regular grantmaking practices. There is no evaluation department; rather, various aspects of impact assessment are part of program staff jobs. The executive vice president for programs and communications leads the Fund’s overall impact assessment work, coordinating internal activities and collaborating with program teams and consultants on Program Reviews and Impact Assessments. The grants management team is an integral partner in this work—maintaining information on the Fund’s grantmaking, running reports, and analyzing data for assessment-related activities.

For Impact Assessments in particular, staff have found that it is important to have **a team approach** to managing the process, which typically lasts around six to nine months. Developing the terms of reference, identifying consultants and people to be interviewed, and reviewing draft reports are time-intensive and benefit from collaboration. This approach also allows for consultants to have a range of people who can serve as resources at the Fund and to have some staff contacts who are more distant from the work—and therefore more objective—than the program director and portfolio team colleagues.

Similarly, our experience has also shown that it is helpful to have **a team of consultants instead of a single consultant working on Impact Assessments**. This allows for multiple perspectives and experiences to be tapped and, of course, for the work to be shared. Staff have found that subject matter experts are well-positioned to conduct the assessments; however, when possible, it is very helpful to have someone on the consultant team with evaluation experience. Substantive knowledge of the work being evaluated is key, both in the success of the work product and in gaining the confidence of the program team and grantees.

### **Audience and Sharing**

The primary audience for our impact assessment work is the board of trustees and staff, given their roles as grantmakers and stewards of the foundation. Program Reviews and Impact Assessment reports are shared with the board prior to the board meeting at which they will be presented, often with an opportunity for interested board members to attend a deeper discussion before the board meeting. Staff and board discuss the findings, as well as staff recommendations for revisions or more significant changes to program guidelines, with the board having final approval over any proposed changes in program direction.

These materials need to be candid and transparent, which might not be fully possible if the initial audience included the public. When possible, however, we will publish public versions of these reports on our website, along with information about our lessons and takeaways. In addition, staff share what they have learned through their evaluation activities and what changes they anticipate in grantmaking through blogs and other program updates.

Recent Impact Assessments, Program Reviews, and related reports and writing are available on each program's page on our website. Materials are also shared with Candid's IssueLab to reach a wider audience. Reports are shared with different field networks, grantees, and those who were interviewed during the process.

### **Timing: Alternating Budget and Evaluation Activities**

Fund staff and board are keen to ensure that evaluation-related activities are embedded into our normal course of business so that they inform decision making.

**The Fund works on a biennial budget cycle.** During budget years, the executive vice president for programs and communications prepares a two-year grantmaking budget for board review that includes program staff updates on developments in their fields and opportunities for the Fund's grantmaking.

Annual evidence of progress documents are the key materials for annual meetings between each program team and senior management. They are shared with the board in "off years" between budget approvals. This practice has improved understanding of the Fund's work among staff and created a shared understanding of what constitutes progress and impact. It also has reinforced for both staff and trustees that lasting impact requires advances on multiple dimensions, does not always reflect a linear progression, and takes time to achieve.

This rhythm of planning and reporting ensures that the board and senior management are regularly updated on field developments, grantee activities, and funding focus.

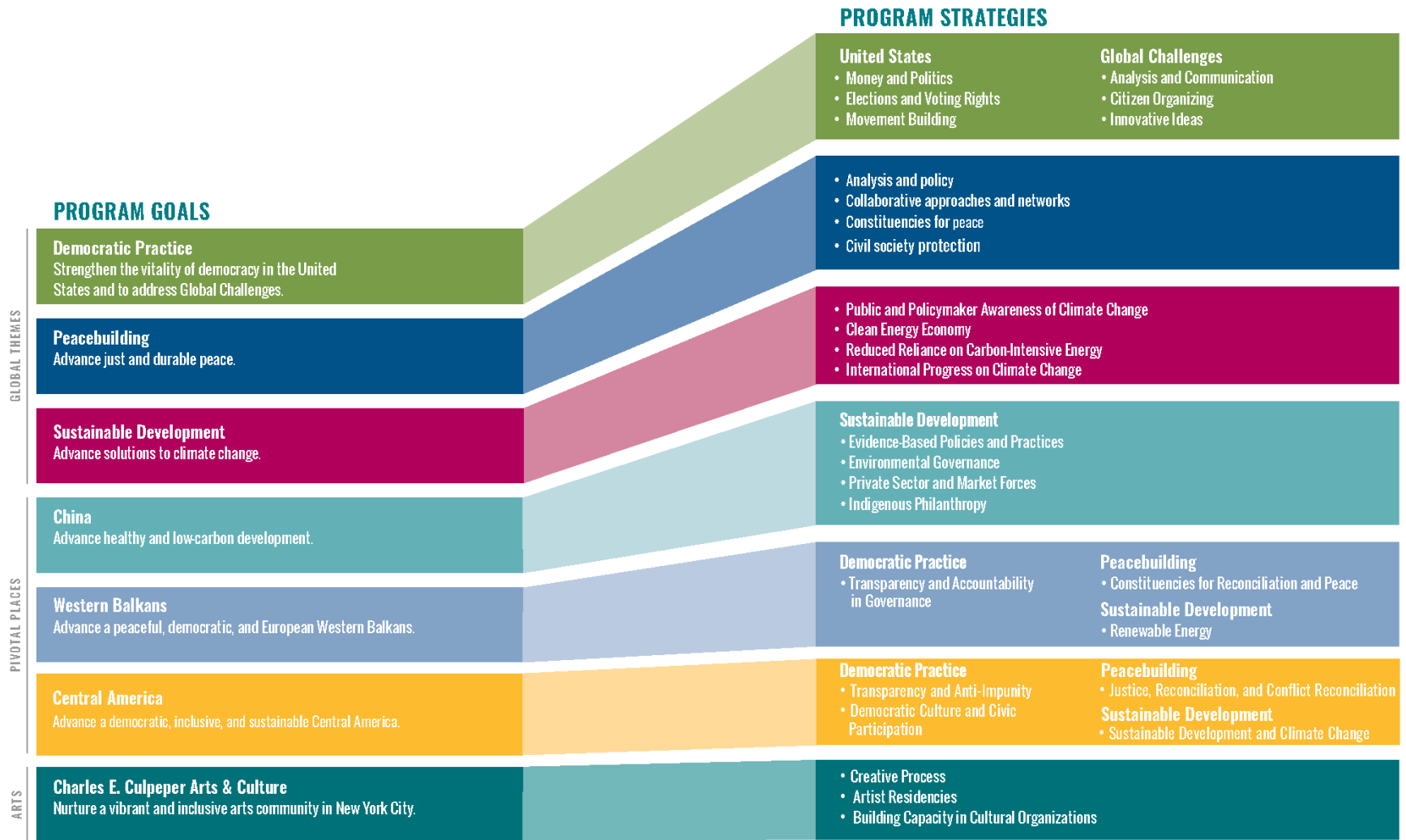
### **CONCLUSION**

Since "The RBF Approach to Impact Assessment" was launched in 2012, Program Reviews and Impact Assessments have been conducted across all the Fund's programs. These efforts have led to revised guidelines, celebration of the completion of areas of work, and the identification of new opportunities for

funding, all with the intention of improving the impact of Fund's grantmaking, institutional effectiveness, and overall performance. Staff will continue to implement and adapt this approach as needed to support the Fund's commitment to being responsive.



**APPENDIX I: PROGRAM ARCHITECTURE**  
As of June 2021



**APPENDIX II: Sample Reporting Form for Evidence of Progress**

**<Program Name>  
Evidence of Progress 2019-2021**

Goal: <Insert goal statement from guidelines> <Briefly note dates and types of guidelines approvals or review/assessment conducted>		
Strategies	Key Indicators of Progress in 3–5 years	Selected 2019-2021 Evidence of Progress
1. <Insert strategy from approved guidelines.>	<Insert one item in each cell from approved Indicators of Progress.>	<Insert brief description of durable changes in behavior, understanding, capacity, public engagement, and public policy that respond to the established indicator, using <b>bold for names of grantee organizations</b> that contributed to progress and <u>hyperlinks</u> wherever possible to media articles, reports, public opinion polls, other sources.>
	<Insert one item in each cell from approved Indicators of Progress.>	<Leave a cell blank if there is not yet durable impact to highlight; there will not always be significant progress to report on all strategies every year. Important meetings held, initiatives launched, new staff hired, partnerships forged, and systems put in place are part of the program team’s monitoring but are not reflected in the evidence of progress documentation.>
	<i>Additional relevant evidence of progress</i>	<We recognize that there may be <u>unanticipated but important progress</u> made to which grantee organizations contribute. This space for additional strategy-relevant evidence of progress.>
2. <Insert strategy from approved guidelines.>	<Insert one item in each cell from approved Indicators of Progress.>	“”
	<Insert one item in each cell from approved Indicators of Progress.>	“”
	<i>Additional relevant evidence of progress</i>	“”
3. <Insert strategy from approved guidelines.>.	<Insert one item in each cell from approved Indicators of Progress.>	“”
	<Insert one item in each cell from approved Indicators of Progress.>	“”
	<i>Additional relevant evidence of progress</i>	“”