Guide to Lifeline, a Tiny Tool

Version 1.3
www.ngo-ideas.net

Our Vision for Lifeline
Communities assess the change that happens around them. Through structured reflection with tools like this, they
- realise what change happened,
- come to understand what led to this change and how they contributed to it,
- become aware of how they can influence developments, and act on it.
This happens initially with the facilitation from NGOs or other outsiders. This process also provides NGOs with a better understanding of the dynamics and priorities in a community.

INTRODUCTION

NGO-IDEAs develops tools for communities and NGOs to measure change and understand what contributed to change. Some tools are described in the Impact Toolbox. Other tools for communities to reflect on change around them are collected in "Tiny Tools - An Overview". They are all handy and relatively easy to apply. One of these Tiny Tools is Lifeline (also called "LifeCurve"). More about NGO-IDEAs and its tools: www.ngo-ideas.net. NGO-IDEAs would appreciate feedback and suggestions for improvements. Please contact Bernward Causemann (bc@causemann.org) or Eberhard Gohl (gohl@impact-plus.de).

A. PURPOSE OF LIFELINE

With Lifeline, community members and the NGO get an idea of how the quality of life changed over the years in the community and what furthered and what hindered change.

B. WHEN TO USE LIFELINE

There are many possible situations when to use Lifeline whenever there is a community that is prepared to reflect on its situation:
- ✓ when there is a need to (re-)consider development efforts in the community,
- ✓ when the NGO wants to introduce other tools for monitoring change, to open up the community and NGO-staff for looking at change,
- ✓ for an evaluation or impact study,
- ✓ to know more about the effects of specific development work – this applies only if the development work had a significant impact on a major part of the community. (For example, one would not use Lifeline with the whole community to measure the effects of work with a few people with leprosy in the community. It could be adapted for use specifically with this group, and one could do one Lifeline with the whole community, one with persons with leprosy, to compare change experienced.)

Links and References
Neubert Susanne 2010: Description and Examples of MAPP. Method for Impact Assessment of Programmes and Projects, DIE, Lusaka 2010, www.ngo-ideas.net/MAPP/
Weblink:
www.intercooperation.ch/offers/download/ic-india/**pme**-1.pdf

One gains an immediate impression of the prevailing conditions within the community and also gets an idea of whether these factors lie within the scope of the project intervention or not.

C. REQUIREMENTS: THIS IS WHAT I NEED

- ✓ **Participants:** About 15-25, either an existing group or a cross-section of a community. If the group is bigger it will take more time, but that is also possible. If the group is smaller, we run the risk that important sections of the community are not present and cannot bring in their views.
- ✓ **Material:** Either a flipchart / big paper and markers, or sand / soil to draw a graph on.
- ✓ **Trust:** The NGO should be familiar with the area and have good relations with the stakeholders. The chosen group should be an entity, a community, e.g. representatives from a village.
- ✓ **Facilitation skills and attitude:** The NGO staff needs knowledge and skills in facilitation and application of PRA tools; they especially need to be trained in Lifeline. They need to have an

intention to help the community really understand the change and believe in empowering people

✓ **Time:** One to two hours, for the 7 steps, not counting preparation.
✓ **Follow-up:** At least a small project activity should result after this exercise. Funds have to be allocated for this if the exercise is not part of an on-going development work.

D. HOW TO DO IT

Step 1: Introduce the tool

Explain the purpose of the exercise to the group or community members present and ask them how far they can look back in the life of the village. Make sure you start with a year that at least half of the people present can remember. Often a significant event is taken as starting point (a drought, a bumper harvest, violent clashes, the building of a road etc.). It is important that participants understand: This is for their understanding, they do not do this to give information to the NGO. There is no need for a bias in what they say.

Step 2: Determine best and worst year

Ask people what they regard as the best year from the starting year to the present, and what the worst year was. Ask for the reasons. Let people discuss and agree on those years.

Step 3: Rate the years on a chart

Create a chart (on paper or on the ground) so that everybody can see it (see example 1). To rate the years use a scale that has five points with assessment ratings ranging from "very negative" to "very positive". The best year is given 5 points: the highest rating. The worst gets 1 point.

Step 4: Discuss and rate all other years

Then let the community discuss all other years: They are given between 1 and 5 points. A lifeline develops that gives a graphic description of developments. The peaks and bottoms of the curves indicate changes in the quality of community life. Ask in each case why the years are rated such. The discussion in the community generates much information (and reflection) on what caused the developments. Document the different opinions on flipchart or in minutes. You need to have a note-taker for that.

In the discussion, community members raise their level of awareness on the situation in the community. The answers can be attributed to a specific year, or to a group of years. When using big sheets of paper, or a flip chart, the answers can usually be written under the timeline, under the respective year.

Step 5: Interpret the result

When the chart is completed, discuss the overall interpretation: What does the chart mean to the people present? Has life really changed in this way? We may add: What was the contribution of the development project? What were the major factors that brought change? Who are the other stakeholders that contributed (but other tools might be better for those questions).

→ It helps to start by asking a community member to summarise what the chart shows.

Step 6: Discuss action and seek feedback

Discuss with the group members what action they would like to take: What do they want to do in the short term to bring about more change? What do they want to achieve in the mid-term?

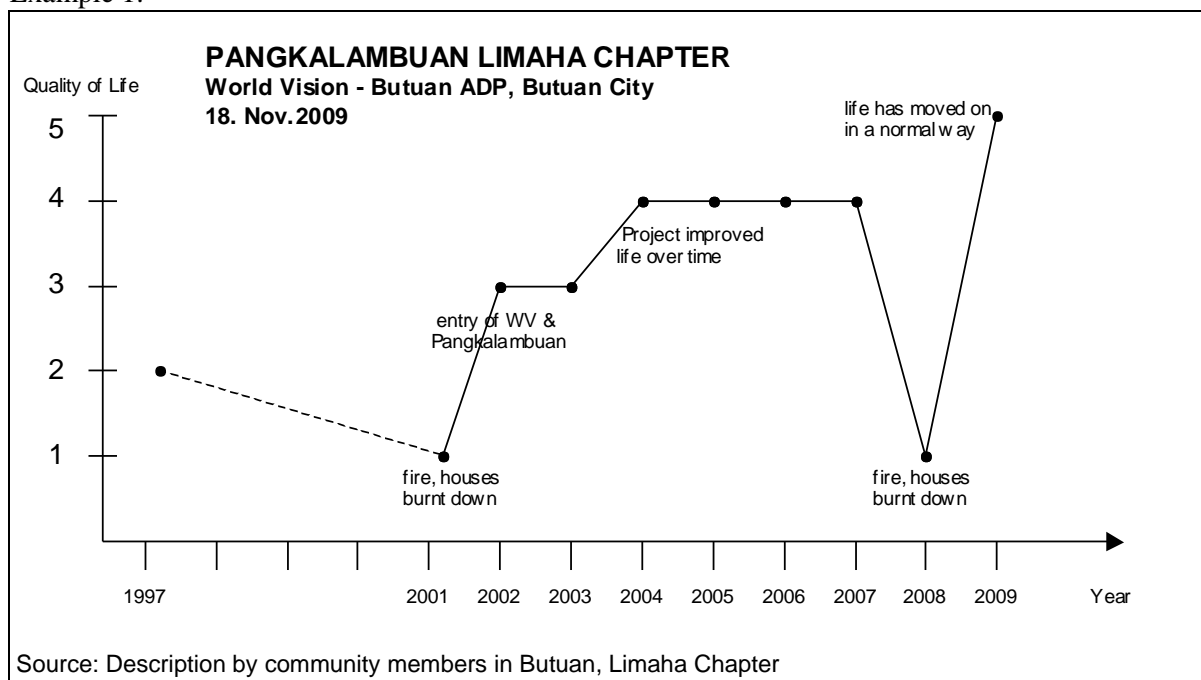→ It helps to ask: How will the line continue: upwards? downwards? straight?

Finally: Ask for feedback on the methodology: Was the exercise useful? Would they recommend it to others? Could you do this exercise yourselves? Could you play it with your family?

Step 7: Reflect afterwards

After leaving the community, discuss among the NGO staff: a) What lessons do you draw from the exercise? b) What would you do differently next time? c) What immediate action should you take? d) What should change in the mid-term in your work with this community (or other communities)?

E. EXAMPLE

Example 1:

PANGKALAMBUAN LIMAHA CHAPTER
World Vision - Butuan ADP, Butuan City
18. Nov. 2009

Quality of Life

life has moved on in a normal way

Project improved life over time

entry of WV & Pangkalambuan

fire, houses burnt down

fire, houses burnt down

1997   2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009   Year

Source: Description by community members in Butuan, Limaha Chapter

Explanations for the ratings as given by community members
1997:   a big flood
The years 1998 to 2000 have not been rated.
2001:   300 houses burnt down. Nothing was left, 1 person killed
2002:   Entry of the NGO: World Vision and the Community Based Organisation: Pangkalambuan / provided assistance for those whose houses burnt but life not stabilised yet
2003-7:   Development work led to improvement. This was a gradual process, faster at the beginning, that was expressed here in one step as people did not opt to use values between 3 and 4
2008:   More houses burnt down than 2001 but NGO and government gave assistance quickly to all affected
2009:   Life has moved on in a normal way and improved further. No tragedies in the families, development work runs, people feel empowered to deal with such crises
The ensuing discussion centred around the question if the community had to leave the area as their lease had been terminated for 2013, or if they could buy the land. Some agreements on next steps were taken. In the feedback on the methodology one participant said: "It was the first time for me to learn that 2009 has been the best year."
Source: about 20 members, mainly women, of a Community Based Organisation in an informal settlement of Butuan City: Pangkalambuan Limaha Chapter, World Vision Butuan, Philippines, 18.11.09

F. PRACTICAL HINTS

✓ If people disagree on how to rate a specific year: We need to help the community to find out the reasons. Maybe someone says that the year was good for the community but for her it was a bad year because her house burnt down. Then it will be possible to agree on an assessment for the majority. It is helpful to document the different arguments. – But may be developments have been different for different groups: Some have benefited from the new road, others live too far away to profit. Or the year was better for men or for women, for fishermen and agriculturalists. In that case we can give two values and note the reasons for the differences.
✓ It is possible to give values like 3.5 or 4.5 if the participants want.
✓ It is quite a challenge to do this exercise with the whole community. But if the participants are selected by the community, this could build trust and ensure a broad representation.
✓ Keep the chart, or a photo, as a reference for the next exercise. Note the names of those who participated.

G. ALTERNATIVES/VARIATIONS

There are many possible variations. Similar time lines (graphical time trends) can be obtained when asking for important changes in people's lives: economic, social, cultural …, even with regard to very specific aspects. This approach is described in the Tiny Tools paper as "Trend Analysis".

"Timeline" is a different tool in which years are described but not rated.

Differentiation of social groups
Lifeline can also be used to compare different courses of change, or different perspectives on change in different social groups: two or more time lines, referring to the same aspect of change, can be drawn to compare women and men; younger and old people; girl and boy children of different age groups, etc. (see example 2).

Example 2:
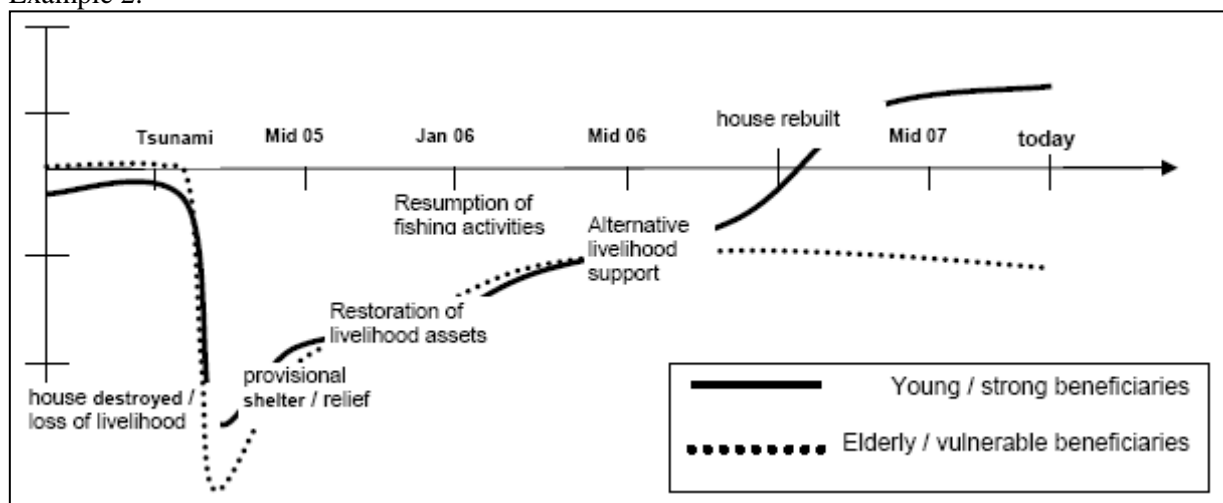
From: FAKT, Methodological Notes for Outcome and Impact Assessment. Experiences from the Final Evaluation of ACT Appeal, Stuttgart 2008

Trend: prolongation of time line for years to come
Lifeline can be extended to the future. Instead of ending in the presence (e.g. 2009) Lifeline can be extended by some years (e.g. to 2014). This "look into the future" may help to identify how people see the sustainability of the changes they have experienced in the past years.

H. SOME WORDS OF CAUTION

- ✓ It should be emphasised here that this tool requires a genuinely participatory approach: It needs, most of all, to help community members to understand better the change around them. It is only secondary that it serves the NGO to get more information.
- ✓ Lifeline cannot be used as the only instrument to assess change. It needs cross-checking (tri-angulation) with other tools, as a bias can develop (like with all other tools). It is particularly powerful as a tool of triangulation: With lifeline we can check the results of our other monitoring instruments. It can also be systematically combined with other tools, like in MAPP (see reference to Tiny Tools on page 1).
- ✓ The explanations behind the figures are more important than the figures themselves.
- ✓ How often should Lifeline be applied? It should not be done every year, but can be repeated after a few years.

Bernward Causemann / Eberhard Gohl / Impact Plus / 17.1.2011