

Lessons in Theory of Change from the Introductory Training on Theories of Change, Impact Pathways and Monitoring & Evaluation

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About Us ••

The CGIAR Research Program on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (CCAFS) brings together the world's best researchers in agricultural science, development research, climate science and Earth System science, to identify and address the most important interactions, synergies and tradeoffs between climate change, agriculture and food security. CCAFS is a strategic partnership of CGIAR and Future Earth, led by the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT). www.ccafs.cgiar.org

Key Points

- It is important for all team members in a CGIAR research program (CRP) to appreciate the value of a theory of change (TOC) approach to planning. Developing an impact pathway is a team effort and benefits from a wider range of experience and knowledge.
- Flexibility when designing TOCs and impact pathways is key. It demands a lot of time, and it is important to capture key elements while aiming for simplified processes where possible.
- At least one member of each 'unit' in the program should have the capacity to facilitate the development of a TOC, impact pathway, and monitoring and evaluation (M&E). The capacity to facilitate and communicate the process should also exist in project teams supported by the CRP.
- It is important to engage communicators, knowledge managers, outreach, monitoring and evaluation personnel to work in a knowledge co-creation process towards the same goals, and to facilitate the inclusion of their valuable input to TOC design.
- Prior to embarking on the process, program leaders should commit to either an open process in which the design and layout of the impact pathway evolves as the team members' capacity increases, or set in place an impact pathway template to which all units adhere. It is important that a program develops a clear terminology and consistent use of it.

The CGIAR Research Program on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (CCAFS) is using theory of change (TOC) planning to specify research outputs, the partnerships needed to produce the outputs, and a plausible hypothesis on how these outputs will contribute to CCAFS and CGIAR development outcomes. This

implies the need for CCAFS scientists, staff and partners to understand and make explicit what are often implicit ideas about how science impacts development. For this purpose, CCAFS convened a Working Group on Impact Pathways and Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) for Results-Based Management (RBM), composed of



members from each thematic flagship and region, as well as interested CGIAR centres and partners.

Training to build capacity

A training for the working group members was held in April 2014. During the training, elements of the CCAFS TOC, impact pathway and M&E frameworks were shared and improved. The objectives of the training were:

- To introduce working group members to outcomes thinking.
- To present draft elements of the CCAFS TOC, Impact Pathway and M&E frameworks.
- To provide working group members with tools that will allow them to guide them in completing their plans in a way that will allow for a consistent, harmonized product for all of CCAFS.
- To establish the working group.

Participants came from mainly three different organizational 'units' - regions, flagships and center projects - and were provided with draft facilitation notes specific to their unit. These notes were produced as a collaborative process by the training facilitators in conjunction with the knowledge with action (K2A) and RBM teams at CCAFS, and tested in a workshop in Southeast Asia¹ (SEA) held prior to the training. Although specific notes were developed for each of the three types of group members, they were designed to emphasize harmonization across all of CCAFS so that the program would have in the end a single, compelling TOC with associated impact pathways and M&E system.

The expected outputs of this first experiential, hands-on training were:

- Draft TOC, impact pathway and M&E plans completed so that participants could present them to their regions, flagships and centres after the training for consideration and revision.
- Participant's plans for working with their units to finalize TOC, impact pathway and M&E plans.

- An improved version of the facilitation notes based on feedback from workshop participants.

The workshop was implemented over five days, and included 29 participants (11 project, 8 flagship, 5 regional, 3 facilitators, 1 gender, 1 communicator). We met some of our objectives and outputs, but not all of them.

Lessons Learnt

There were a number of lessons learnt from the training regarding achievements, enabling factors and unexpected challenges. The most important ones are presented in the sections below.

Achievements

Several aspects of the training were successful:

- Participants became familiar with elements of higher-levels of the CCAFS impact pathway, including Intermediate Development Outcomes (IDOs) and flagship behavioural change outcomes projected through 2019 and 2025 with associated targets (See Annex example 1).
- A critical mass of the CCAFS team now understands the concept of a single CCAFS impact pathway, with the pathways of the program's regions and flagships linking together through common pathway elements (2019 outcomes), and have an appreciation of the complexity of achieving such harmonization in a multi-faceted program (see Annex for nested impact pathways examples).
- There is increased understanding within CCAFS leadership that an RBM framework must be based on explicit impact pathway elements.
- Participants, through applying concepts during the training, progressed to a greater level of skill and understanding of the "how-to" of framing a TOC and writing up impact pathways.
- Participants brought great capacity and skills to the training, put them

into practice, focused them better and learned from others.

- Although the training objectives were ambitious, we completed a first step in a process that will continue in what should be iterative cycles of social learning.
- The workshop participants worked together in a safe and productive atmosphere of collegiality, and appreciated the importance of continuing in this manner to finalize their impact pathways after the workshop.

Enabling Factors

We believe that several factors allowed for this success:

- The timing of the workshop was good, as there was a pressing need to harmonize the impact pathways of the flagships and regions and there was already enough understanding of the common upper-level of the CCAFS pathway to allow consistency while tailoring the individual pathways to the unique characteristics of each region and flagship.
- Bringing together the right set of people allowed us to invest in individuals in each unit that were committed to carrying out the TOC process and ensuring that the final product reflected the ideas and ambitions of the CCAFS team and its partners. Most of the regional and flagship participants were the science officers (SOs), and they developed a strong belief in and ownership of the process and its results.
- There was a good learning environment and friendly atmosphere that was conducive to capacity development and empowerment of the participants. A TOC process is inherently iterative, which can create friction when it comes to the preferences of program managers unfamiliar with the process to receive and review final products. The training was conducted in such a way that each participant worked on his/her own pathway, but with opportunities for open discussion and constructive

¹ CCSL Learning Brief No. 8, July 2014
https://cgispace.cgiar.org/bitstream/handle/10568/42447/CCSL%20learning%20brief%208_FINAL.pdf



feedback so that harmonization could slowly evolve. This understanding that their work wasn't being judged allowed the participants to be creative and supportive in their harmonization efforts.

- For centre project representatives, it was valuable to have something concrete in terms of a CCAFS TOC to align to and work towards. They were able to exchange with each other and the regions in which they are working regarding the design of impact pathways, and to harmonize their emerging project proposals with the outcomes and indicators of the regions and flagships in which they are working.

Challenges encountered

We also ran into some unplanned-for hurdles, some of which, in the end, challenged our progress in the workshop:

- The main problem was the level of empowerment of some science officers. Making explicit a TOC requires taking decisions, especially when setting strategic goals or targets and deciding on indicators of success. This is another reason that the purposeful facilitation of decision-making is so important when discussing impact pathways. Because developing a TOC takes time, skill and dedication, these types of assignments often end up the responsibility of interested lower-level staff. But these may not be invested with the power to take decisions. This creates a catch-22 situation seen in many contexts, in which lower-level staff are motivated and have the capacity for something like designing a TOC, but their supervisors do not fully understand the process and so may not sufficiently empower the staff member - or may even feel threatened by a subordinate with new skills, and therefore blocks progress with the task. To overcome this type of situation, many programs have adopted 'decision-maker' trainings. These are led by the newly trained subordinates and allows the supervisor to understand, appreciate and support the new task, but are short to not be prohibitive in terms of time commitment for the supervisor.
- The two main workshop objectives were a bit at odds with each other. Increasing working group members' capacity while simultaneously achieving progress regarding the impact pathways proved too much for the time we had for the workshop. On the other hand, five days is a lot of time to ask anyone to attend a training.
- A natural next step in developing impact pathways is processing them for ease of communication. Summary versions, "slimming down", and focusing on the short- and mid-terms has been suggested by many. However, focusing on 'simplicity' too early may be counter-productive. An impact pathway is meant to be a detailed plan for the project team, not for public consumption - detailed enough that the pathway is clear and implementable. Slimming down for communication may be better done after the necessary initial "back and forth", trade-off and prioritization discussions involving not only SOs, but flagship and regional leaders.
- Exactly how communications can contribute to the implementation of an impact pathway and achievement of IDOs remains unclear. Although most believe that communication is important to achieving outcomes, in most programs the communication team remains in a 'silo' that focuses on advocacy for the program rather than communicators teaming with researchers for outcomes. This can be overcome by helping all team members understand how important it is to carefully design communications and engagement activities within an impact pathway, with clarification of communicators' role in research in development process for achieving outcomes.
- Working group members were not adequately prepared during the training for presenting their work and the TOC process to decision-makers in CCAFS. As a result, the higher-level impact pathways were not ready on time for the projects to map into them.

Next Steps

This is a process that is in its infancy, not only in CCAFS but for CGIAR in general. Designing large research for development programs using a TOC process is an ambitious undertaking that has not been tried before. The work is complex and difficult to categorize. It lies somewhere at the intersection of project planning, priority setting, M&E, learning, outreach and management. There needs to be institutional learning and documentation of the process, and clear expression of an institutional willingness in CGIAR and its donors to empower, learn and change as the need arises.

We need to remember that TOCs are in fact hypotheses. Once established they should be subjected to objective M&E that encourages adaptive management. But we cannot take this as license to be 'sloppy', treating TOC as a 'soft' approach to science that doesn't deserve rigorous research. CGIAR should invest in developing standards of good practice and frameworks for its TOC and M&E process that emphasize learning based on rigor so that the argument for adaptive management becomes obvious.

A first version TOC Facilitation Guide was produced, taking into consideration experiences and recommendations from the training. However, the guide is already being redrawn to take on board learning and programmatic demands that have been occurring after the training, particularly the need for simplification. To maintain institutional support, the process had to become more user-friendly, less burdensome and more geared towards programmatic needs while still constituting rigorous planning. Internal reflection and flexibility have been key to securing institutional buy-in for moving forward.

Therefore, the K2A and RBM teams subsequently took a step back and



simplified the process. This happened after the workshop, when it became clear that the process would only continue in CCAFS if it became simpler, more geared towards program needs and less burdensome. This simplification process, along with a description of the important step of standardizing indicators and setting targets, will be the content for an up-coming learning note.

CCAFS has taken an important lead in the TOC and RBM process within CGIAR. The working group provides CCAFS with an opportunity to influence the Consortium's common RBM framework and the outcome indicator development process, to organize its regional and flagship programs, and to finalize a demand-driven research portfolio. Having a group working on M&E will not be enough- scientists in flagships, regions and projects must take responsibility for their own learning and outputs, monitoring their impact pathways, and ensuring a coherent, consistent program.

Following the training, the K2A and RBM teams have supported group members in completing their impact pathways and M&E plans. A Wiki² has been put in place to support the social learning process, but it needs to be well facilitated. Experience has shown that the learning process can be catalyzed by strategically timed meetings and refresher trainings. CCAFS might consider joining with other CRPs so that the working group members can practice their facilitation skills by helping sister CRPs develop their own TOCs, and for cross-CRP training.

The process has taught us how important it is to develop an M&E system in parallel with our impact pathway, so that they feed into each other. CCAFS has developed an M&E strategy³ that is based on the principles of outcome thinking. Moreover, CCAFS is redesigning its tools to allow for adaptive management and learning to take place. The CCAFS Planning and Reporting (P&R) platform has been redesigned to record progress towards the achievement of outcomes, allow for learning to be documented and for adaptive management.

Review first attempts to nest impact pathways for the thematic flagship, in this case Flagship 1 on 'Climate-smart agriculture practices' and CCAFS Southeast Asia region. The work provides insights to the development of the high-level impact pathways with indicators for the 2025 and 2019 outcomes and a detailed perspective, with a holistic approach, showing a wider number of initiatives that are contributing towards set outcomes: <http://ccafs.cgiar.org/impact-pathways>

² <http://ccafs-ip-toc-cd.wikispaces.com/>
Please contact: c.schubert@cgiar.org or schuetztonya@gmail.com to get access to the CCAFS wikispaces.

³ <http://ccafs.cgiar.org/publications/ccafs-monitoring-and-evaluation-strategy>



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CCSL Partners:

