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Lessons in Theory of Change from a Series of Regional Planning Workshops

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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 messages
Regional planning workshops are a good value-for-money investment for the following reasons:

• To build coherent projects and a cohesive regional research for development program portfolio, it is important to have structural dimensions to help harmonize science with development demands.

• Bringing project teams together very early in the process will allow them to develop project plans in the knowledge of other on-going projects, while there is still enough flexibility to make changes to their plans.

• Developing and writing project plans with a carefully selected diverse group of people can help strengthen the assumptions being made in the theories of change described.

• It helps to break down silos and competition by encouraging project teams to identify linkages and overlaps, and to develop interest in each other's plan and find ways to realize synergies. It contributes to the selection process if people want to work in integrated, interdisciplinary, multi-partnerships research for development with a focus on outcomes.

• Each region has its own context, and its own development challenges, institutional arrangements and set up; and each has a unique mix of people involved. At the start, we were envisaging developing one workshop model that could be used in all regions; but we soon learnt that the model had to be adapted for each regional workshop.

The CGIAR Research Program on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (CCAFS) is using theory of change (TOC) planning to specify research outputs, partnerships needed to produce outputs, and a plausible hypothesis on how these outputs will contribute to development outcomes. This learning note is part of a series to capture the process, progress and lessons from CCAFS in its endeavor to plan, implement and deliver research for development with a strong focus on outcomes. Since the last of these learning notes was published[1], the process for finalizing the impact pathways (IPs) was considerably simplified to ensure that it was as practical as possible and to ensure buy-in. This learning note describes that process, and the series of regional planning workshops; much of this work was focused on reducing the complexity of the IPs and their monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework as far as was practicable.

1 See CCSL Learning Brief Number 10: 'Lessons in Theory of Change from the Introductory Training on Theories of Change, Impact Pathways and Monitoring and Evaluation'.

Simplification of the programmatic framework / impact pathways planning

Based on experience with the results-based management (RBM) trial projects, when looking at the IPs and possible simplifications, the following main changes were identified, tested and implemented:

- **Reducing the number of indicators** to be monitored at the program level to a minimum: one for 2025 and two for 2019 for each flagship. Thus the program will monitor a total of 12 indicators, four outcome indicators for 2025 and eight for 2019 (see Table 1).

- Improved **specification of the indicator formulation and a standardized wording of outcome statements** were undertaken (see Table 1).

Table 1: Example of CCAFS Flagship Indicators

Flagship	2025	2019
1: Climate smart agricultural practices	# mio. of farmers, incl. at least 40% women, with strengthened adaptive capacity and food security as a result of programmatic CSA investment.	# of (sub-) national development initiatives and public institutions that prioritize and inform project implementation of equitable best bet CSA options using CCAFS science and decision support tools.
		# of public-private actors at (sub-) national levels are using new incentive mechanisms or business models/markets that explicitly promote climate smart approaches along the value chain, using CCAFS science.
2: Climate change information services and safety nets	# mio. of farmers, incl. at least 40% women, with improved capacity to adapt to climate related risk by accessing research-informed climate services and/or well-targeted safety nets.	# of regional and/or(sub-) national institutions using research outputs to develop or improve major demand-driven, equitable, climate informed services that support rural communities.
		# of donors, international development and non-government organizations working with national partners to invest in research-informed demand-driven climate services for agricultural and food security decision-making.
3: Greenhouse gas emissions reduction	% decrease in agricultural emissions intensities in eligible systems compared with 2025 projected emissions.	# of low emissions plans developed that have significant mitigation potential for 2025, i.e. will contribute to at least 5% GHG reduction or reach at least 10,000 farmers, including at least 10% women.
		# millions of hectares targeted by research-informed initiatives for scaling up low-emissions agriculture and preventing deforestation.
4: Policies & institutions for climate resilient food systems	# of (sub-)national jurisdictions that increased their equitable institutional investments in climate smart food systems	# of equitable national/subnational food system policies enacted that take into consideration climate smart practices and strategies.
		#of regional/global organizations that inform their equitable institutional investments in climate smart food systems using CCAFS outputs.

- **We merged major output groups** (MOGs, i.e. clusters of outputs) **with major research actions** (MRAs, i.e. clusters of activities) and kept only the MOG level for the higher-level (flagship and regional) IPs, 2-6 per 2019 flagship outcome.

- For program monitoring and evaluation (M&E), we reduced t**he focus on IPs to the CCAFS funded program of work**. An inventory of other ongoing initiatives, which may contribute together with CCAFS work to achieving the outcome targets, was moved into the TOC narrative.

- **Projects are mapped into the higher level regional and flagship IPs** through their contributions towards program **outcomes** and flagship targets.

- The CCAFS management team has gone through several iterations of defining and adjusting the **outcome target numbers, in relation to** the literature, experience, and inputs from flagship and regional teams, as well as through the projects with their numerous partners. The numbers are broken down into annual targets for 2015 and 2016.

Conceptualization of the regional workshops

Conceptualization was done in an **iterative process** with the CCAFS management team to build a generic concept note for all five workshops. This was then adjusted to fit the specific regional contexts, with the regional and flagship teams. Overall we aimed to provide a space for the projects in a region to come together and work on improving the project plans. The purpose was to **build a coherent and cohesive regional program of work AND learn more about CCAFS programmatic framework thinking** with its shift towards RBM and an outcome-focused M&E system. Each workshop tried to cover these two big areas. **Detailed objectives** changed slightly after the first workshop and were simplified and reduced to:

• Harmonise and integrate IPs, TOC and target indicators among the regional portfolio of projects;

• Maximize synergies among projects by developing a strategy for working together on common sites,

baselines, research methodologies, and stakeholder engagement and communication.

The corresponding **expected outputs** were:

• Clear CCAFS program of work for each region (and how the four flagships support this);

• Unified set of project IPs and M&E plans and how they contribute to regional and flagship IPs.

The **expected outcomes**–we aimed to build a unified spirit among the participants by being in this process together and making the most out of this given opportunity – including that all participants:

• Understand regional and flagship IPs, what they are contributing to with their work and what is required from them with regards to M&E.

• Know what projects will be held accountable for and what needs to be put in place to deliver evidence for their outcomes, so that they can develop M&E operational plans.

• Feel comfortable and well informed to share key insights with other project team members and resource persons (FPL, RPL, SO) for the implementation of their projects.

For the **implementation of the series of workshops, a wide range of factors** needed to be considered, including venue, duration, composition of participants, number of projects, geographic distribution of project work, number of partners and next-users of project results, which parts of a project planning and IPs to select to allow projects to identify linkages, and overlaps and opportunities for synergies.

Project Planning

Projects were selected on the basis of submitted concept notes and feedback from reviewers (flagship leaders, regional program leaders, program director, external reviewers). Project leaders were asked to revise their project plans using the CCAFS online planning and reporting platform (P&R) prior to the workshops, and received further feedback during the workshops.

Lessons Learnt

We met most of our objectives and outputs, but it requires some pulling together after the workshops; for example, collecting finalized outcome targets and improved narratives, projects making adjustments in the P&R platform, and pulling together workshop content summaries for each region.

Several lessons learnt from of the workshop series include:

» The move from a log-frame approach to an outcome-orientated approach constitutes **radical change**. We have found **no off-the-peg solutions** to some of the challenges of implementation, highlighting the importance of collective learning.

» Some of the **assumptions** we made did not quite play out: 1) While we thought that we could develop a **model agenda**, we realized that each region comes with its own context and staffing specifics that needed appropriate adjustments. 2) While we thought that the shift in thinking, **experience and knowledge about IPs** building had already been wider spread within CGIAR, it turned out that there is still a lot of capacity strengthening needed to support project teams to actually build their IPs.

» After two days participants reached a level of saturation in terms of how much new thinking they could take in and still effectively and efficiently apply to their project workplans. Therefore, we **reduced the number of dimensions** by which the projects could identify overlaps and synergies to allow for more time and depth to explore the focus areas.

» In retrospect, it is clear that practically **any sequencing of activities will be suboptimal**, in some respect: retro-fitting IPs to an existing set of projects has its own challenges, while developing IPs in the absence of specific projects has others. This was similar with the sequencing of some activities during the workshops. Key is to make a start somewhere and offer a strawman for it to be refined in an iterative process and using RBM as a supportive approach (not a science in itself).

» **Impact pathways** are living documents that require a flexible design process including learning and harmonization between all flagships and target regions in CCAFS. **Complex, nested** IPs turned out **not to be the way to go**; we needed a certain amount of negotiation over time to get to a simpler system that people felt they could buy into. However, even a simplified system requires resources to develop project IPs and to ensure consistency with Flagship and regional IPs.

» In the regional workshop series we introduced a key CCAFS product, a harmonized M&E system that asks projects to produce evidence that aggregates at higher levels and across geographies. It helps to provide a clear picture of what results are occurring, what results are expected, how they will be produced, how they will have to be reported upon and what their role in the process is.

» People matter enormously and for that matter staffing. Compositions are different each time. It is the task of leadership and facilitation to consider each participant's specific strengths, skills and motivations to allow them to perform at their best.

Enabling factors for success

The following factors were key to a successful workshop series:

– Leadership authority and support.

– Support teams for logistics, resource people for thematic areas (flagship, gender) and project partners, especially national partners kept people honest and accountable to the real world.

– A clear articulation of the targets as a vision leading to outcomes at the start of the meeting and keeping this vision front and centre till the end is essential to guide process and emphasize RBM.

– Flexible and participatory facilitation and adaptation to the group dynamics.

– Having a trial set up with a reduced number of projects to pilot processes first, giving a realistic picture of what resources are required, before implementing across the whole program.

– Acknowledging and acting upon identified capacity strengthening needs and changes in roles and responsibilities.

Challenges encountered and contentious issues

There were a few challenges encountered – some unforeseen –and mechanisms of how to better cope with them were developed for the short- or medium-term. A few of the challenges are expected to be addressed continuously in the course of regional program implementation.

» CGIAR centre competition was experienced as a disabling factor when working towards a collaborate effort for development outcomes and social transformation.

» The indicators were sometimes felt not to be specific or disaggregated enough, when they were presented during the workshops. The absence of consolidated indicators at the system level (intermediary development outcomes, IDOs) created some uncertainty.

» Discussions on gender and social differentiation will require more attention with practical solutions to ensure that we are making the social norm transformations.

» There is some work to do on incentives to work towards and make outcomes happen, for projects and project partners as well as next-users. This includes the shift towards an evaluative culture, effective learning, and promoting "desirable" behaviour.

» There is a fine balance to achieve between carrying out high-quality science and the search for outcomes and impact.

Next Steps

Through the regional workshops some decision points emerged that were brought to the attention of the CCAFS

management team, for example, approval of the RBM evaluation criteria for the overall CCAFS program. Besides addressing the challenges above there are some other practical next steps following the workshop series, for example:

» Project plans to be finalized in the P&R system and signed off by CCAFS flagship leaders, regional program leaders and program director.

» Capacity to strengthen and communicate TOC, IPs and M&E needs to be mainstreamed throughout CCAFS and the CG centres implementing the research.

» Workshop documentation and processing of content.

» Develop and agree on appropriate mechanisms to modify portfolios so that outcome targets can indeed be achieved and to allow solid science to be aligned and integrated into development practices, e.g. gap filling, shifts in activities, and projects having access to different skill sets.

» Gender and social differentiation will be picked up by the newly recruited gender coordinator to help with how this can practically be mainstreamed into the portfolio projects.

» Improving the P&R planning platform and developing the revamped reporting part for the trial projects for early 2015, so that the system is ready for the 2016 planning and 2015 reporting cycle for all projects.

» There is an additional element of evaluation in the annual reporting: Project will be evaluated by CCAFS management team and through a self-evaluation based on some criteria.

Conclusions

During 2014, project planning, culminating in the series of regional workshops, has taken a great deal of input from many people (e.g.

management team, project leaders and partners, and centre contact points). We judge the effort and considerable resources to be worthwhile. It helped to provide clarity and coherence to projects and workplans, cohesion within the program portfolio, and alignment towards outcome indicators that can be aggregated across projects and regions. Well-articulated IPs help understand how projects contribute to higher level outcomes, and clarify responsibilities for M&E and reporting. The outcomes of several projects are quite ambitious; there is growing realization within many project teams that different partners and kinds of partnerships are needed to achieve these. And show that collaborative and coordinated effort is needed.

Given the change in thinking required for implementing an outcome-orientated approach to research for development, we are satisfied with what has been achieved. Regional project portfolios have become more coherent and projects are generally aligned along appropriate IPs. While moving to a new, perfectly implemented system in one year is unrealistic, changes that have become evident over the past year are substantial and will be improved on in the coming years. CCAFS has made a great deal of progress in developing and setting up its project portfolio for a RBM, outcome-focused research for development program. Through the regional workshops the truthing of the outcome target indicators was done with the result that CCAFS has put together a portfolio of projects that should allow the achievement of the promised targets – the program may actually over-deliver in some areas.

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