Issues and approaches to assessing political, institutional and social outcomes

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SPIA Matchmaking Event, July 20, 2022

- ISSUES AND PRINCIPLES

- MENU OF METHODS

- NEXT STEPS

- DISCUSSION AND FEEDBACK

The role of qualitative approaches to examine political, institutional, social change

- Various of the End-of-Initiative outcomes & additional ideas for "impact studies" involve political, institutional, and social changes – often in the behavior of external actors.

- Because assessments of political, institutional, and social changes take place within complex environments that are difficult to control (in an evaluation sense) and in fact are likely changing over time, generally qualitative methods are most appropriate.

- Qualitative approaches focus on detailing the complex narrative of change and supporting it with evidence.

- "Quantitative" methods (e.g., enumerating outputs, surveying stakeholders) can be used as well, to complement / confirm / deepen / enrich the narrative.

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The statements about EOI outcomes vary in terms of purpose, and so in what kinds of methods could generate the needed answers. Not all require an Impact Assessment.

"The Initiative-supported Networks will reach 30,000 beneficiaries…."

"How has this Initiative helped stakeholders to use data more effectively?"

"The pilot projects will test principles for future scaling up…"

"Are the Work Packages and Centers working together efficiently and effectively?"

"Five million smallholders will adopt the innovations package and increase prod'n by 10%."

Certainly, an Impact Assessment can be used for more than one purpose. But some of these questions could be answered by a standard monitoring system or an operations evaluation or just a "study."

To get clarity for design and use of the findings…

-> Clearly define the purpose of the assessment.

- Is it monitoring for reporting? Monitoring for management?

- Is it for evaluation – so really causally examining "Did these activities result in these changes?"

    - Potentially complemented with an operations (process) study to look at How and Why

- Is it to promote learning?

-> Know who wants this information and why (motivation), how they will use it, how you will use it

- And so, what do you really need to measure?

- What are the most effective ways to generate and present the information to the users?

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Many of the statements are fairly aspirational and focus on outcomes that actually depend on various external factors and the actions of others.

Some cite organizational change *within* other organizations as a goal. Some have grand goals, but (perhaps wisely) limit their contribution.

"International agencies make policy decisions using Initiative tools that reduce poverty by 20%.."

"At least 50 indigenous leaders have increased capacity and are working in a multisectoral way to shape food systems and natural resource management…"

"Private sector invests $10 million in sustainable technologies…"

"Robust policy analysis and implementation by 3 country governments will lead to a significant increase in crop production produced by sustainable technologies…"

"Smallholders will benefit from a more efficient, effective, expansive, and demand-driven, fully-resourced extension system, resulting in significant increases in production, relative to baseline values provided by the Initiative."

"Partner organizations have management practices and structures that empower staff to co-design and co-implement dashboard systems, including collection, processing, and use of data."

Make sure that that the institutional, political, social changes you claim you are responsible for are feasible, reasonable, and ethical.

And that they are tightly and clearly related to what your Initiative does…

[These varied widely…Research? new technologies? or capacity building? technical assistance? advisory services and change leadership?]
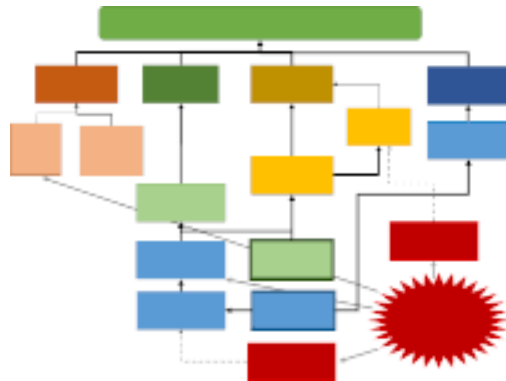
As with any good evaluation, you still need an **underlying conceptual framework of causality** and clearly defined **indicators of "impact"** that are credible and feasible to collect.

– and you still need to make sure your question is "evaluable."

It's useful to combine Impact Pathway and Theory of Change approaches with more standard Logframe approaches.

Within the context of a qualitative narrative, indicators should consider characteristics of indicators such as being SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-bound) and Accurate (valid), Reliable (replicable), Feasible, Useful, Ethical

Tracing out the impact pathway clearly in detail in terms of activities, outputs, who the actors are, and connections between each step will help define where to focus the impact narrative.
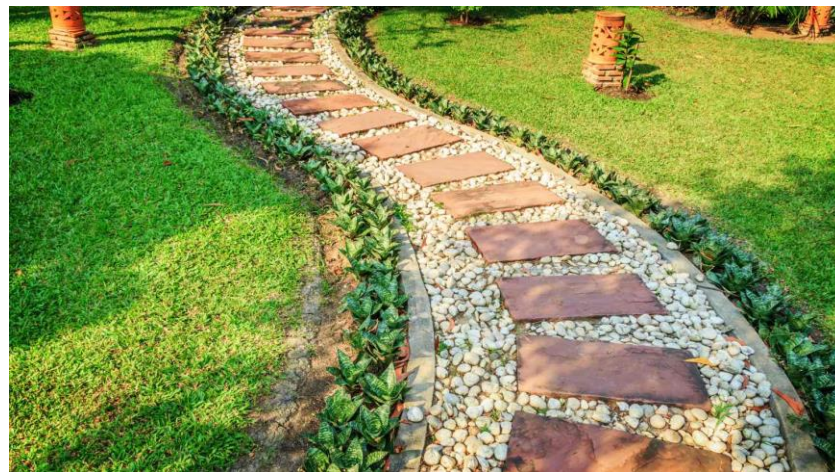
In that impact pathway,

- Construct the narrative

- Understand who is doing what, how they interact, what factors are affecting them

  - Who are your key boundary partners – that is, those you "hand off" your work to and who are responsible for taking the use and application of the work forward to impact.

  - What are their needs?

- How do you interact with them (with what actions, with what outputs, with what intended effects)

  - What do you plan to do to influence the actors and the environment that will lead to change?

- How do these outputs/actions flow through to the next steps – particularly how does the "direct effect" of your work flow on to your intended outcomes of change?

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Using the detailed Impact Pathways, you can determine your "impacts" and your "evaluable" questions.

➔ What is the impact pathway for your specific "intervention"?

- Pathway from inputs, activities, and outputs for your "product" (technology, research finding, tool, innovation, etc.) to the final political / institutional / social change (outcome/impact)
- Pathway can be at project, Work Package, or initiative level

➔ What is the *direct effect* of your intervention?

- That is, as part of the impact pathway, what will happen as a *direct result* of your product (what effect, on whom)
- At what point do your actions/product have actual "impact" – the direct effect for which you are fully responsible?

- The product is then *handed off to others* who are actually responsible for making change
- Who are these "boundary partners", e.g., the government, private sector actors?
- What are the actions you hope to (need to!) see from these boundary partners?
- And how will this generate the intended outcomes? And what, specifically, are those outcomes in terms of political, institutional, or social change?

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➔ **Using an evaluator's perspective, what *can you* be held accountable for?**

- That is, what parts of the impact pathway *are under your control*, including the direct effects,

    and so an evaluator could hold you responsible for them?

- Beyond direct effects, what are the outcomes to which an evaluator could *reasonably* say you should be able to *contribute*?

Your Initiative may have very little if any control over some outcomes (e.g., "private sector makes gender transformative changes")

But you *can* be held responsible for whether you did your best to engage with boundary partners along the rest of the impact pathway to achieve those outcomes -- e.g., to produce and deliver useful products effectively and support appropriate changes in the enabling environment, including targeting influential actors and having a strong communications or capacity-building strategy.

This implies also that you have understood the pathway (chain of actions, actors, factors) as well

Proposals have Theories of Change at Initiative as well as Work Package and project level – and they cover both individuals and institutions

"At least seven organizations use tools developed by the Initiative…"

"The project has established an Information and Action Hub in at least two countries..."

"Policymakers and private sector decisionmakers use the surveillance tools…"

➔ What is the scale of direct effect and intended outcomes?

- Will the evaluation focus on changes due to the initiative, program, or project?

- Will it focus on institutional, political, or social change?

The impact pathways, direct effects, and indicators will differ.

ISSUE 4: REFLECT THE CONTEXT

Statements cut across regions and countries, with differing political, institutional, and social contexts. Within a country, organizational contexts and capacities also differ. But stated Outcomes are often the same.

"Five companies in WCA, ESA, and LAC use the data provided…"

"Farmers in Bangladesh, Colombia, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Mozambique use modeling data and support tools…"

"The animal-agriculture health community in Burkina Faso, Kenya, Tanzania, and Sudan establish a joint Community of Practice…"

"Data will be taken up and used for delta management planning by appropriate government ministries in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam…"

➔ What is the context in which these actions and changes will take place?

➔ How does this affect actions, effects, outcomes?

• The context in which the Impact Pathway operates varies. Institutional structures, decisionmaking processes, resources and individual, institutional, and systemic capacities, key political actors, social mores, relevance of the private sector all vary.

• The contexts you work in will change actions, direct effects, outcomes.   Theories of Change and Impact Pathways will look different across the contexts.

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Outcomes are sometimes stated as clearly "short term" or "to be achieved by 2024." That seems like a good idea. Others will likely to be achieved only after the end of the Initiative. Some have grand goals, but (perhaps wisely) focus their contribution.

"Starting from zero in 2022, by 2024, 400,000 farmers will use Initiative services."

"In the long term, we expect to contribute to food system thinking applied across government. In the short-term, in the life of this Initiative, we will take the first step and build awareness by policymakers about how they can apply FST in their work."

Even if you report at the end of Year 3, you only have about 2 years from now to have the change you will measure (if not less) because you need to start the evaluation study some months before the project ends.

Unfortunately, this is also not optimal, since the information you finally obtain at the end of the Initiative may be relevant for reporting, but it is not particularly useful for management or immediately applicable operational insights.

→ **What changes are realistically possible within the timeframe of the project?**

- Political, institutional, and social change can be slow and does not happen linearly. There are multiple change processes and multiple actors happening at the same time.

- There will also be jags and lags in implementation of the project itself.

Be clear on how much time it will take to see the effects of your work and for these changes to work through the Impact Pathways to outcomes.

- Refer back to the Impact Pathway and apply a realistic timeline.

- The CRP Outcome/Impact Case Report templates were useful. They recognized the process and the time it took for innovations to reach impact ("Achieve Outcomes").

    Stages:
    - Discourse/behavior change among Next Users (Direct Effect)
    - Policy/Practice Change by End Users (Intermediate or Final Outcomes)
    - Adoption /Impact at Scale (Final Outcome/Impact)

The CGIAR has a mandate to produce global public goods. The proposals have had to describe how the Initiatives are filling global gaps in technologies and information.

The Outcome statements make clear how the Initiatives must work with a variety of partners to produce those goods and then have those goods adopted by the "right" users.

Sometimes the partners are not clear, but are left vague. Clarity is needed to understand *whose behavior needs to change* to achieve your expected outcome..and *how* you expect to achieve that.

"Researchers, policymakers, development practitioners, international agencies use the information to shape policies...."

"Vulnerable farmers and smallholders acquire capacities…"

"Women and youth are prioritized for leadership roles…"

"Food companies, seed companies, private sector firms use the analyses to establish standards and analyses for marketing......"

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Our contributions (underlined by actions and Impact Pathways) should reflect CGIAR's goals and role as an international public organization and bear ethical principles in mind.

The Direct Effects and Outcomes, and our statements of them, should also take those principles into account.

➢ No matter who the partner, does the work remain public-oriented?

➔ Are we monitoring to ensure that we are filling the gaps in an ethical way?

- Are our actions, and the resources we bring, <u>adding value to the country</u>, especially to the livelihoods of smallholders and other marginalized groups?

- Are we <u>crowding in</u>, and not crowding out, national and regional capacities?

- Are we working to build <u>in-country capacities</u> needed to do this work?

- Are these actions <u>inclusive</u>, recognizing and respecting all groups, especially ones that are traditionally marginalized and disempowered?

➔ Do statements about Activities, Direct Effects and Outcomes <u>reflect the appropriate role of the CGIAR?</u>

- Policy changes for example, are the responsibility of the people of that country, not the CGIAR. The CGIAR can produce the technologies and information to inform change and ensure they contribute to the policy process.

What can you do to help an external evaluator who might be hired in the last months of the initiative?

➔ Build the evidence base as you progress; you don't have to wait until the end.

  In many (non-IE) evaluations, you might start at your effect and work backwards to see how you arrived at the effect.

  Instead, in these sorts of evaluations, think of being guided by the effect/outcome that you are working toward and not wait until the end to evaluate.

  This will help the evaluator develop the narrative on the foundations of a solid evidence base, and the evaluator can be more strategic in filling in gaps rather than starting from scratch.

  How to answer the question/critique: Is the evaluator being "objective" if the initiative is feeding the data?

➔ Do a baseline. Even if qualitative, you still need a baseline of "what the initial situation was" in terms of your indicators.

➔ Don't wait until Year 3

  Use your Theory of Change, the impact pathways and the direct effects to design and develop questions at baseline, systematically keep track of your actions during the course of the intervention/initiative and follow up at the end.

➜ Example of a **baseline and endline** to show change

The baseline would be to understand the current status of the innovation, knowledge, tool etc.

- Conduct focus group discussions and/or internet surveys and/or in-depth interviews at the beginning of the intervention with stakeholders whom you expect to influence.

- Use the TOC and impact pathways to design indicators and develop questions. E.g., if you expect to "support" researchers, define "support".

- If you are working with multiple stakeholders in multiple countries, be strategic in selecting the country/stakeholder so that what you are trying to assess is evaluable. Maybe design a comparative case study?

- Whatever you do, document the strategy.

- Repeat the research at the end of the initiative to see if there are changes, and if the changes are what you expected and if there are also unintended changes.

  Did you change any strategies as a results of the learnings from the baseline? If so, that would be evidence of a "trace" or "fingerprint" to show that you adapted and were responsive to stakeholder needs and your intervention followed the principles of "learning-by-doing".

  This evidence in isolation is probably not sufficient to demonstrate change, but it becomes part of the evidence base.

➜ Example of a **timeline or "journey map"**

• Evaluators hired at the end of the intervention often spend considerable time gathering evidence to construct a timeline of change.

• A forward-looking study can gather the evidence systematically as the intervention unfolds.

• These can be a series of "contemporaneous notes" from discussions, meetings, workshops, conferences etc. You can design a template on the key indicators that you want to track at every such "event" and ensure that at the end, there is a timeline of, say, key decisions that can reasonably be shown to have influenced stakeholders.

• If you want to influence farmers, consider the use of "farmer diaries"

• Keep track of reports, briefs, newspaper/online reporting. If you helped produce these, it can be included into the timeline.

You could end up developing multiple "journey maps" for different parts of your intervention.

Again, any such evidence in isolation is probably not sufficient to demonstrate change, but it becomes part of the evidence base.

METHODS

➔   There are different approaches to building a narrative – Contribution Analysis, Process Tracing, Most Significant Change, Outcome Mapping etc.

➔   But regardless of approach, the tools in the tool-kit for qualitative evaluation remain the same – focus groups, in-depth interviews, notes, observations, documents (briefs, reports etc.)

➔   What matters most is that the data collection rests on a strong foundation using principles of rigorous research.

➔   For this, think through:

•   Sampling of respondents

•   Using the TOC, thinking through the impact pathways, defining terms, being attuned to context

•   Triangulation

•   Saturation

•   Attribution: Because many actors participate in and many factors affect your impact pathway. Change cannot be attributed to only one organization or initiative. So you need to tease out the contribution.

•   Ethics of what an external agency can and should do in terms of influence

•   Recognize work of others and partners

NEXT STEPS: HOW CAN SPIA HELP?

➜ Community of Practice?

➜ Resource uploaded
     on the SPIA website?

➜ Speaker series?

➜ Guidance document?