



Photo by Anna Hickman

Cross-CRP Analysis of Theories of Change in the 2017-2022 CGIAR Research Program Portfolio (CRP2)



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CONTEXT

The Independent Science and Partnership Council (ISPC) seeks to encourage CGIAR Research Programs (CRPs) to place a stronger emphasis on the Theory of Change (ToC) to ensure the design and proposed implementation of CRPs take into account the context in which the research outputs will be applied to development goals, and the priorities of the partners who will use the research. The assumption is that if teams make the effort to thoroughly develop a ToC that includes a participatory approach, then i) their programs will be better designed, ii) stronger linkages will be developed within and across CRPs and with national programs, iii) more robust and structured learning agendas will emerge, and iv) the ToC will ultimately become a living document that positively affects and guides their work during program implementation.

This brief examines the CRP2 proposals to comment on the Theory of Change and Impact Pathways contained within three interlinked clusters of initiatives: Innovation in Agri-Food Systems, Global Integrating Programs, and System-Level platforms.

METHODOLOGY

The ISPC review of the Theory of Change in CRP2 proposals relied on external documents and commissioned external reviews, as well as internal evaluations by the ISPC Council and Secretariat. Key documents included the [Strategy and Results Framework \(SRF\) 2016-2030](#); [Final Guidance for Full Proposals 2017-2022](#); the ISPC's [Strategic Overview of CGIAR research program, Part I. Theories of Change and Impact Pathways](#), which includes a commissioned paper by Batchelor and Goodman (2012); and the 2015 [ISPC Commentary on the CGIAR Portfolio-CRP2](#).

Specific areas for evaluating the Theories of Change in the proposals included assessing whether the ToCs included 1) a link to the SRF, 2) a clear and plausible Impact Pathway, 3) clear assumptions, and 4) a linkage with farmers, and also whether they 5) captured cross-cutting issues, 6) elucidated integration and inter-CRP synergies, 7) aligned with national plans, 8) identified key partnerships, and 9) were designed for a dynamic and complex context.

This brief is based on a paper prepared by Jeffrey Ried, Simon Batchelor, and Rachid Serraj (January 2017), which is itself based on two reports commissioned by the ISPC.

FINDINGS

- The CRPs have mostly moved beyond simplistic logic models. While still focusing on predominantly linear paths, there is considerable recognition of the importance of feedback loops, complexity, uncertainty, and opportunity.
- Each ToC was unique in structure and presentation for a given proposal, which reflected the unique context for each CRP, and also the lack of a common template or guiding document. This enabled flexibility, but also at times created gaps in logic, an absence of critical information, inconsistent use of key terms, and difficulty in creating a cross-CRP ToC.
- All CRPs aligned their outputs and outcomes to the CGIAR's Intermediate Development Outcomes (IDOs) and sub-IDOs, but the degree of alignment was variable and at times only weakly connected.
- The ToCs in general showed limited application of mechanisms of causality, which is an important component in creating functional ToCs that can guide and change during program implementation.
- Key information on assumptions was inconsistent across proposals; assumptions are critical to developing a dynamic ToC, creating a learning agenda, and capturing and disseminating important lessons and results during implementation.
- All ToCs placed emphasis on stakeholder mapping, which is essential since the proposed activities will only reach farmers through others; however, most ToCs did not adequately identify the key stakeholders and their expected role in achieving impact.
- The methodology used to construct the ToC was absent from most proposals; therefore, it was difficult to tell if the ToC was created by senior management or developed through group participation. The latter is a process that would enable the formation of strong teams and partnerships, a common perspective, and agreement on steps to success, but it takes considerably more time.

- The importance of engaging women in agricultural development was acknowledged in all proposals; however, additional details on the specific issues, areas of focus, potential solutions, and assumptions were not common across the ToCs.
- Country-level engagement is required for the work of all CRPs to reach farmers and achieve impact; while information in this area was scattered throughout the proposal narratives, most ToCs provided only high-level consideration of this essential item and very few provided information on site integration.
- All proposals recognized the importance of integration with other CRPs; most would benefit from a closer examination of who they will work with, why they would work with them, and the expected role of the CRP partner in achieving impact.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The overall quality of the Theories of Change has greatly improved in all CRPs since 2012, but most still fall short of their potential to benefit the program; to a lesser extent, the ToC recommendations of 2012 still apply. Each ToC is generally reasonable and provides a snapshot of what will be done, why it will be done, and how it connects to the SRF. However, the CRPs need to further develop the breadth and depth of their ToCs across multiple dimensions for the ToC to be a dynamic instrument that can guide program implementation, articulate a clearly defined learning agenda, and address the need to incorporate non-linear thinking when moving from research to development and impact.

