

Strengthening Research to Impact by using Theory of Change



The time is now behind us that the purpose of research was to simply produce knowledge. Research now must produce outputs that have the potential to lead to development impact. To do so, researchers must better articulate the causal chain from research to impact and make the underlying assumptions therein explicit. International research institutions, such as the members of the Association of International Research and Development Centers for Agriculture (AIRCA), are therefore strengthening their impact pathways and investing in impact evaluation. Against this backdrop, AVRDC – The World Vegetable Center recently hosted a workshop at its headquarters in Taiwan on the use of Theory of Change in project planning and implementation. The workshop was facilitated by Dr. Boru Douthwaite, a renowned scientist in the field of theory of change and participatory impact pathways in agricultural research for development. Twenty participants from five AIRCA centers participated in the workshop.

Every program and project has a vision of how it seeks to make an impact, but this vision is often not articulated sufficiently and project staff and stakeholders might have different interpretations of it. Making the project theory of change explicit and agreeing on it with all stakeholders and project staff can be a powerful tool to understand the critical linkages in the impact pathway so that the project can address these. Doing this not only increases the likelihood of making impact, but also makes project management and project evaluation easier as it helps to prioritize more effectively.

To Boru Douthwaite, drafting a theory of change is like drafting the plot of a story. Christopher Booker, an English journalist and author, once generalized that there are seven basic plots for all works of fiction, but Boru proposed the idea that all agricultural research for development falls into just three basic plots: policy influence, building capacity, and technology transfer. When you articulate a theory of change, ideally in a graphical as well as a narrative form, then you try to make a really convincing storyline. However, unlike a work of fiction, a projected theory of change must be grounded in reality and present the actual stakeholders and real-world constraints.

Workshop participants presented how their centers are using theory of change in their projects and gave each other critical feedback on how to do better. Building on the concept, they also shared their experiences on how their key programs are assumed to make impact at scale, robust impact evaluation, and the inclusion of gender in impact evaluation.

This workshop was the first face-to-face meeting of AIRCA's Community of Practice on Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E), which was established in 2014. All AIRCA centers face similar challenges in M&E and impact evaluation while each center has only a very few specialists in this area. The Community of Practice therefore helps in building capacity and reflecting on each center's performance in this important area. Participants were enthusiastic about the experience of this first workshop and agreed to make it an annual event with ICIMOD generously agreeing to host the next year's meeting in Kathmandu.

