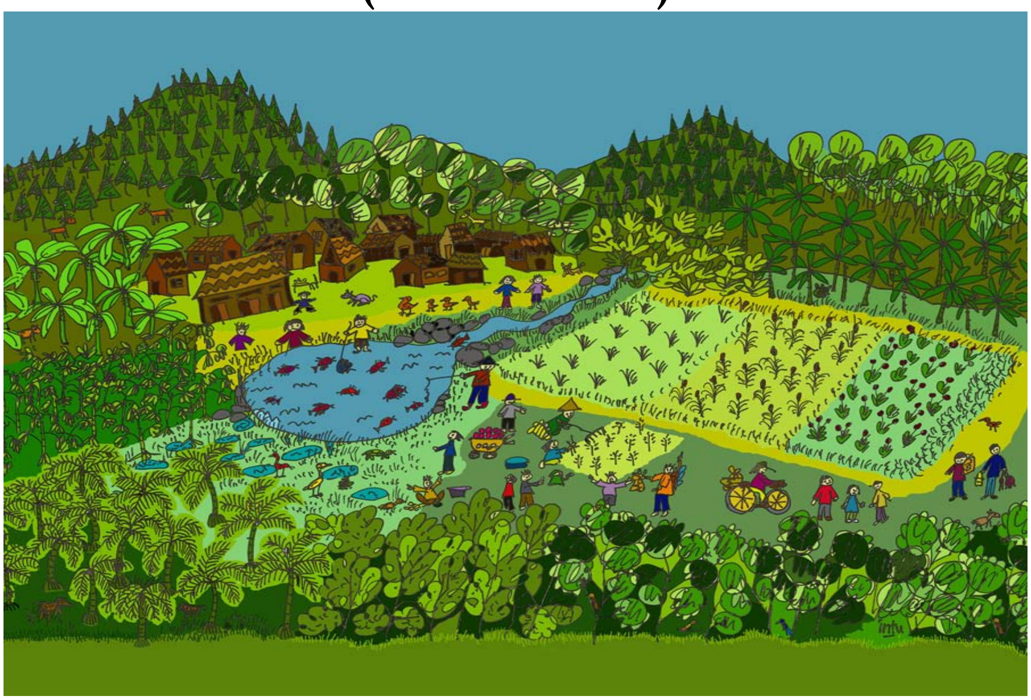
Lessons from implementing a Theory of change M&E system in the Livelihoods and Landscapes Strategy initiative

(draft version)



Ricardo Furman
Forest Conservation Programme
IUCN Gland

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I N D E X

Lessons from implementing a Theory of change M&E system in the Livelihoods and Landscapes Strategy[1]
-draft version-

Ricardo Furman[2]

1. **The programme: Livelihood and landscape Strategy (LLS)**

Livelihoods and Landscapes Strategy (LLS) is an initiative aims to contribute to the improvement of the livelihoods of rural people through the sustainable management of multi-functional forested landscapes. It is being implemented by the International Union for Conservancy of Nature (IUCN), with the support of The Netherlands. It is a four years program that started in 2007. LLS is a direct response to: (i) to find practical ways to support governments and donors in ensuring that the benefits of national poverty reduction strategies reach the rural poor, and in particular those who are highly dependent on natural resources, in particular forests and trees. Here LLS aligns with nationally development priorities and seeks to broaden the range of actors, notably civil society and private sector partners. (ii) By strengthening the relationship between forests and rural poverty reduction, the Strategy responds to a second global challenge, of how to reverse the lack of momentum in implementing international commitments on sustainable forest use and conservation, and therefore address the slippage of forests-related issues within international development

The Strategy is based on the idea that achieving improved livelihoods and better managed landscapes requires paying attention to several separate but related elements (or themes). These include: poverty reduction through income generation from the sale of forest products; supporting better development of market linkages and arrangements to enable greater profits from forest product marketing; securing effective rights to land, trees and forest products; improved

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[2] ricardo.furman@iucn.org Monitoring and Evaluation Officer of the Livelihoods and Landscapes Strategy, Forest Conservation Program at the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (Gland, Switzerland)

governance of forests including effective forest law; and restoring forests and forest landscapes as assets for rural livelihoods.

LLS plans and implements the program (including the monitoring and on-going evaluation component) with local partners that includes communities, NGOs, government bodies and international organizations working in the landscape. IUCN acts as a facilitator of the process, providing technical guidance, material support and being a trustable broker that convenes different actors. This bottom-up methodology is currently developed in pilot landscapes in 23 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America[3]. These landscapes provide an opportunity to test hypothesis of changes through an action learning approach in different social and environmental settings. Lessons from them, feed into policy processes aimed to influence national policies which will enable LLS process and outcomes to be scaled-up. Adaptive management and action-learning are central strategies that cross-cut all interventions.

2. What is this paper about?

This paper is centered in reflecting about the potential of applying the Theory of change as a useful tool in participatory monitoring and self-evaluation in the LLS context. It is not a comprehensive review of all elements of M&E in the initiative, in particular because the initiative is implemented in a decentralized way and different paths are followed in many of the 23 countries where it is running.

3. The M&E approach and the Theory of change

In September 2008 the LLS participatory M&E (PM&E) was launched, after a process of discussion and sharing with partners. Until then, the M&E component was not applied under a harmonized global system; but with some diversity in approaches. The predominant planning was results approach. In most countries a situational analysis provided the opportunity for strategic planning and data for baselines; and in some countries a logical framework had been developed. It can be said that some sort of implicit Theory of change was present in the planning. In few countries it has been applied an assets framework based on the Sustainable livelihoods framework (Sayer J. et al. 2006). In terms of monitoring, not data collection systems were on place, periodic meetings with partners to discuss achievements and pitfalls were developed, in few countries action-learning groups were recently formed; and in most, the analysis was kept at activity level.

[3] LLS is working in the following countries in Africa: Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda; Asia: Cambodia China, India, Indonesia, Lao, Thailand and Vietnam; and Latin America: Brazil and Guatemala

A tension was present between a more open space approach + strategic planning versus a planning framework (the Logical framework or the broad ToC) that, while keeping the work plan flexible, provides guidance about what to do. Both positions agreed that flexibility is particularly important. It pointed out to the field offices that unexpected process and outcomes were relevant and should be captured.

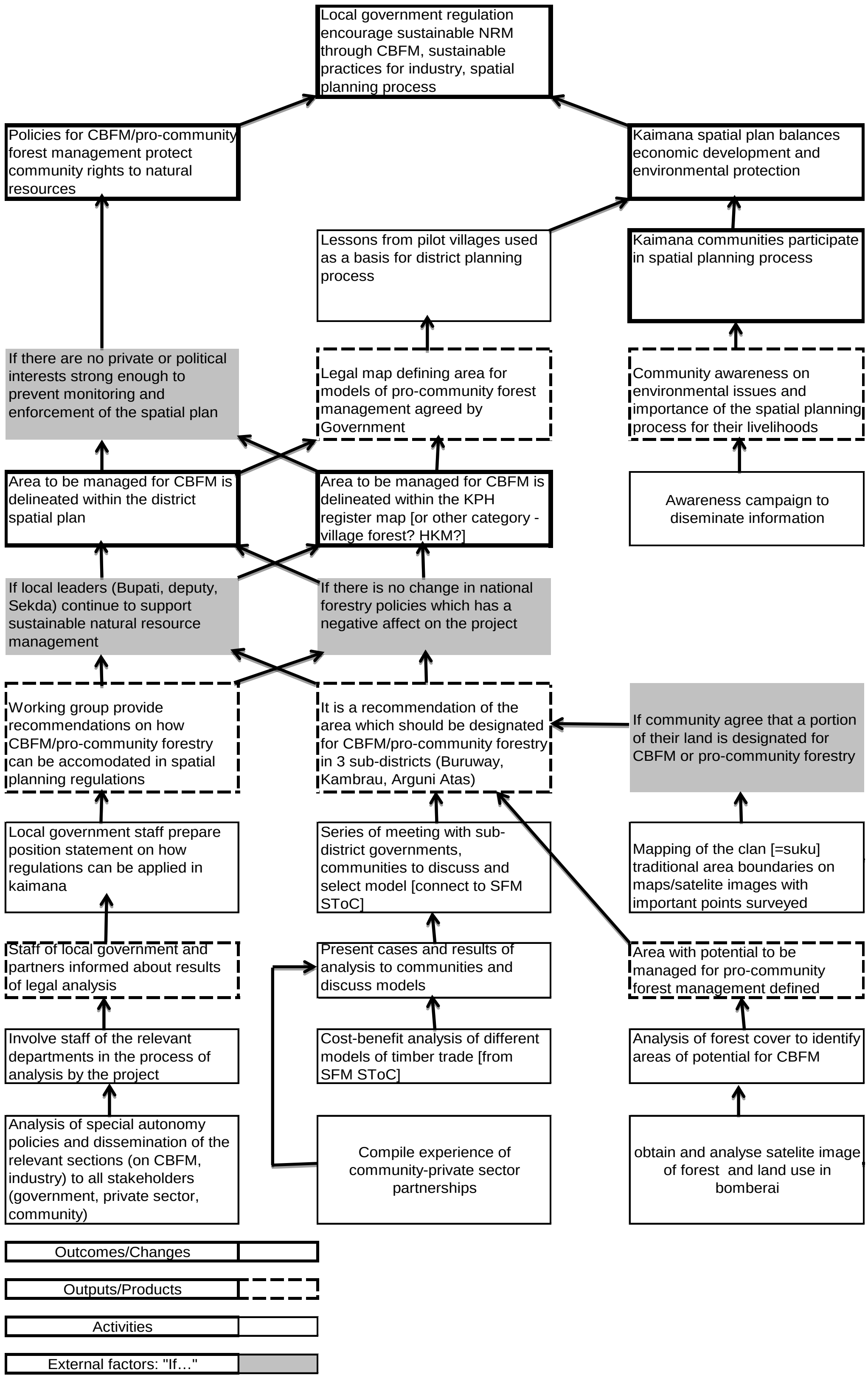
By mid 2008, it was decided that LLS Participatory Planning M&E (PPM&E) approach was going to start by formulating the locally oriented and owned landscape Theory of change (ToC). It was reaffirmed that the core effort will focus on learning rather than accountability. Four purposes were defined:

a. Management of the LLS Strategy in close collaboration with partners and the local population.
b. Learning with (not around) the local population and key stakeholders (including men and women) at different levels within the landscapes and GCs as well as with the other GCs.
c. Empowerment of the local people and partners in the field so that they own and contribute to the field of development and conservation.
d. Accountability upward (to the donor), and downward (to the people we are working with).

The core data backbone of the M&E will come from the M&E questions (a combination of performance and evaluation questions) and their answers (the information needs) instead of indicators to promote reflection more about how and why changes happened or not. The decision was taken based on two considerations: a recommendation to IUCN from a recent institutional evaluation that all programmes should have a ToC; and the practical fact that the ToC was a more flexible and comprehensive tool that other tools with similar goals, like the logical framework and the logical model. The ToC is expected to capture better the external factors and the feedback loops[4] and also to frame the on-going hypothesis testing process.

We understand the Theory of change as a coherent set of ideas that describes: what the change should be, how a change process occurs, what makes it happen, what has to happen for the intended result/ outcome to be reached, who needs to be involved, whose interests are at stake, and what the result/ outcome of a change process should be. It is basically a road map in the change process that starts by a participatory process with communities, government, NGOs and other LLS partners to provide a foundation in the long term change processes.

[4] The advice of Wageningen International was a central factor to take this decision.



Graph 1. Bomberai landscape, Papua/Indonesia Sub Theory of Change 3 of Spatial planning (LLS Indonesia-Samdhana Institute)

A theory of Change approach has some similarities with the Logical framework, but it is different in that it seeks to describe at each and every level of the theory chain why one outcome leads to the other and why one activity will lead to an intended outcome/ result. In a theory of change approach, the assumptions underlying the internal logic or causal links chain need to be examined and tested (LLS 2009:10).

Learning is understood here as a social process in which individuals and groups learn how to innovate and adapt in response to changing social and environmental conditions. It includes two dimensions: retrospective (focus on monitoring past actions and changes) and anticipative learning (identify through scenario-based techniques the range of changes that might occur)[5]. Both dimensions are developed under an action-learning approach as discussed by Fisher and Jackson (2008).

In this methodology, local perception and triangulation are central to validate the answers to M&E questions. The ToC has been developed basically like an M&E starting tool (as an input to develop the M&E questions as the core of the M&E system). The M&E questions are developed for the mains expected changes (direct outcomes form the intervention) in terms of what and why it has been or has not been achieved. The "why" question provides the clue for learning[6]. It facilitates understanding about reasons for achievement or denial of the expected change, due to the activities and outputs planned and/or to "external factors"[7] (pre-identified or unexpected). Once program changes are implemented, the consequences of the main change are also monitoring in the same way

When the M&E questions were selected as a key element of the M&E system, a methodological issue was the to which dimensions should the M&E questions to look at in terms of monitoring and of evaluation. The 5 DAC evaluation criteria were the departure point, but for local partners the criteria were not straight forward, they were abstract concepts. It was decided then than effectiveness and relevance dimensions will be the criteria to use in the on-going M&E process. Direct impact is embedded in the logic of the ToC. This means that two criteria were putting aside for formulating specific questions: efficiency and sustainability.

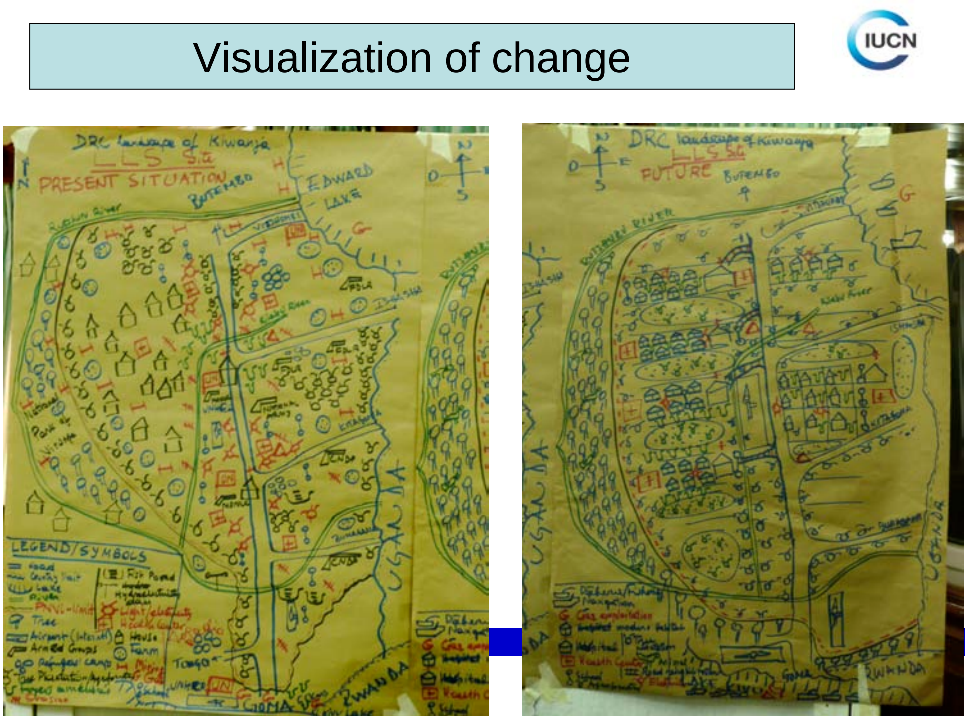
[5] Based on Woodhill forthcoming quoted by Guijt I. (8:2009).
[6] The M&E questions as a tool was elaborated from the IFAD Performance questions developed by Guijt and Woodhill (2002)
[7] In fact «external» to the ToC as the reality includes many elements outside of the LLS ToC.

Efficiency is managed internally in IUCN; and sustainability is embedded in the design logic of the interventions as we expect that the outcomes will be replicable and scalable-up, therefore sustainable. Of course, the fact that no questions were included does not mean that the themes are not important. They are, and the analysis would bring up them at any time.

In addition, LLS is going through a mid-term review and a final evaluation that discuss the five evaluation key dimensions from the perspective of external evaluators.

The planning and M&E pathway works as follows:

a. Strategic analysis, through various tools and sources, establishes a landscape area and explore major areas of intervention (for a forest program). This includes discussion with different stakeholders, field visits, etc.; in particular local mapping/visualization



Graph 2. Example of a visualization mapping exercise for a Burundi landscape

b. Identification of major expected changes from local populations and other key stakeholders to negotiate the changes to be pursued and their links with changes outside the landscape but that can influence its outcomes (agricultural market, national regulation, political changes in government, etc.).

A sample of local communities is selected to develop specific sub-ToCs In each community a group of @10-15 people participates for @2 hours in draft each sub-ToC.

Photo 1. Developing Sub-ToC with communities in Kayanza landscape, Burundi

Later on, with other stakeholders, other sub-ToCs are developed and the different sub-ToCs are integrated in a broader and schematic landscape ToC.

c. M&E questions are elaborated for each sub-ToC

Table 1. Some examples from LLS PM&E Plans to illustrate good information needs formulation (Cameroon, Ghana and Thailand):

M&E question	Information needs	Methodological comment
1. Are the local government (prefect, sub-prefecture), police, judges, and mayor implementing measures to reduce illegal hunting? 2. If yes, how were these measures developed? 3. If not, is there any ongoing process to	- Type of measures against poaching implemented (with reference data like number of cases) per stakeholder - Description of the process of generate the measures or the ongoing status of the generation process	Information needs link questions 1, 2 and 3. Therefore, they are integrated as the data collection can be done at the same time with the same tools.

implement these measures?		
4. Are key Yaoundé University stakeholders informed about local poverty perceptions? 5. If not why	- Key stakeholders can explain the value of understanding local perceptions of poverty linked to LLS supported activities - Reasons why the activity has not been achieved	The first question has identified elements for the answer. But the second information need is straight forward the same as the question 5.
6. Why have some HHs move up or down from one rank to the other?	-No of HHs per wealth rank - Key elements that make possible to move up or down (type of activities, external support, etc.)	No rephrasing, but the elements needed to answer the questions.
7. Which forest rehabilitation techniques (under FLR) were more useful and less useful for farmers? And why?	List of forest rehabilitation techniques (under FLR) that have been applied by farmers Useful elements of the techniques Not useful elements of the techniques	Not rephrasing, but listing the elements of the question

d. For each M&E question are defined the elements to answer (information needs) and how, when and who will collect and process the data.
e. A schedule and key questions for reflection meetings are defined. At this level, two different models have been implemented: one of 3 days semi-annual meetings of partners (that update every 6 months the monitoring plan) and a second about ad-hoc Action-learning groups on specific themes/outcomes that have periodic meetings.

   The reflection meetings are learning spaces to contribute to generate ownership of the M&E methodology and give a voice to different actors; in addition to the specific goal of planning and adapting from the reflection process.

Photo 2. Participants in an M&E Semi-annual meeting in Yokadouma, Cameroon (August 2009)

f. The b, c and d steps are done as much as possible, or at minimum validated, in meetings with partners and communities representatives. Once approved they are recognized the LLS M&E plan and the process to collect and analyze data is rolled out.

This model has been elaborated after implementation in different countries. In real life it presents variations: level of involvement of partners and local population in different steps, action-learning groups already formed, etc.

The essential of the process has been by now to foster a learning culture by reducing the amount of information to be collected and selecting key questions that reflect the understanding and priorities of an intervention.

4. The implementation process

4.1. The institutional setting

Partners and officers in the field are open to learn new methodologies and adopting them beyond LLS, potential for trust and ownership in techniques and approaches are clearly present. LLS has a strong policy of investing in building capacities in different themes such as poverty reduction, access and tenancy rights, markets, advocacy, M&E and so on. IUCN is looking as a good listener and provider of innovative methodologies. Hence, the possibilities to introduce a tool like the Theory of change are there.

At the same time partners' capacities and experience in the M&E field is diverse. Most of partners are local NGOs and local level officers from natural resources ministries and local governments, plus local communities' chiefs, informal leaders and authorities of landscapes' associations.

In terms of capacities, the technical staff comes from natural sciences background studies and extensive field experience. Many have some practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal techniques applied basically in planning and under a more extractive rather than an "interactive participatory" approach. In terms of M&E, the practice is more on activity-oriented monitoring and a "classical" logical framework approach focus on accountability.

4.2. Learning by doing

The implementation process started in Africa with two regional practical workshops[8] of 4 and 6 days (one for Anglophone countries and other for Francophone countries). Both workshops consisted of blocks referred to the content of the M&E plan elements (Theory of change, M&E questions, Data collection and processing, and Reflection ands reporting). The workshops showed that more hands-on support was needed, "learning by doing" in the real situation. The M&E officer with support from the LLS Africa coordinator, one sub-regional M&E officer (for Francophone countries) and the Wageningen International consultant covered the majority of LLS African countries in 3-4 days visits to build the M&E Plans that reflects the new approach. Based on the learning from Africa, in Asia and Latin America, a country based "learning by doing" support was provided by the M&E global advisor, the LLS Asia coordinator and an IUCN regional programme officer. Those involved in facilitating the process in Africa were facilitators and/or participants in regional training workshops. In Asia the two persons were trained in a trainer to trainers' session through the work in one of the LLS Asian country, Thailand.

The result of this global training showed unavoidable situations: different understanding of some aspects of the process, product of the cascade process and of the "personal bias". Useful learning came from it: necessity of invest more time with field teams on explaining how M&E is integrated to implementation activities rather than runs as a parallel process; not enough understanding of the value of using "why" questions, reflected in formulation –in some countries – only of descriptive questions that meant come back to an "indicators approaches"; the possibility to merge matrixes in the M&E plan (the information

[8] Significant support for facilitating these workshops was provided by Mine Pabari; then member of Wageningen International.

needs and the data collection matrix) that for some simplified the work, and ToC formulated without including the central external factors.

Table 2. M&E using M&E questions versus using indicators

Topic	M&E questions	Indicators
Outcome versus process M&E	Outcome-oriented, activity and outputs matters only when relevant to understand the outcome achievement or failure	Outcome and/or process-oriented M&E
Learning versus accountability	The learning elements is central by asking why	Accountability tends to prevail over learning: report what was achieved.
Participatory/Extractive and Quantitative/Qualitative dimensions	+ Participatory and qualitative that extractive and quantitative (emphasis in perception to understand the reasons that things happened in a particular way)	Quantitative/Qualitative and Participatory/Non participatory approaches balance is variable
Amount of information required for the analysis	Only core elements of the intervention are directly included	All elements (i.e. impacts, outcomes and outputs/ activities) have at least one indicator each
Data collection efforts	Less data collection because questions are fewer than indicators	All indicators require data to be collected

Source: LLS October 2009 Learning through Participatory Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, Guidelines for LLS Geographic Components and Landscapes (draft) IUCN, Gland

A challenge has been and is still, somehow, to answer the fact that as the program was underway for more than a year; when the global M&E approach started to be applied, some country teams made the case that this was arriving too late. There was some reluctance to integrate it due to the technical transaction costs of understanding and developing/adapting a “new” methodology. They assumed that the cost of an innovative approach to improve its practice it was too high. An overall conclusion is that to implement an M&E system ambitious in terms of demanding participatory analysis outcome-oriented is a challenge that requires more that a short training process and external support

5. Lessons and challenges so far…

We bring in the learning captured up to now in this journey. We divided the lessons in two types: what we think should be done in a PPM&E approach with the Theory of change and the M&E questions as major tools (the To Do's), and those cases that did not work so well and we want to share them as well.

5.1. Regarding how to build a learning culture in involved stakeholders:

a. The Do's

- ToC is a "desired future situation" that is dynamic and changing. It should be reviewed through reflection and considering adjustments periodically (as a rule of thumb every six months)
- When doing the ToC, be sure that participants in the process are well informed about the change that want to plan (so not superficial or partial knowledge)
- The ToC is oriented to reduce the gap between planning and reality rather than the gap between planning and execution
- The use of key M&E questions from the ToC reduces the amount of data/information to collect (versus a Logical framework approach) and hence, allocates more time for analysis and reflection. This is key because time for systemic reflection in M&E tends to be limited
- By designing the ToC and formulating and applying the M&E questions, we begin to practice a systemic and reflective M&E. This change of behavior conducts to perceive a methodology to learn, in addition to accountability. It make also aware of the value of baseline data.
- The "Why" questions are central to reinforce the learning dimension of M&E. They moving out the discussion from what have been done (indicators) to the factors to make it happen and what we can distill from it
- The methodology may influence partners in replicating it in other initiatives: it contributes to innovation
- You have to go through incremental cycles of learning because the methodology is perceived as complex (as it is different from common behavior focused on reporting activities and outputs and communicate indicators rather than reflecting for learning)
- M&E is not only about measuring effectiveness, but also to engage with the actors that will participate in an on-going basis in the development process that will affect livelihoods and natural resources in the landscapes and

beyond. Learning is not only about outcomes but also about the M&E process itself.

b. The challenges

- The methodology is focused on the learning dimension of M&E, but people needs to answer also accountability demands (i.e. report to donors).
- The design of realistic and concrete ToCs: what are the bounds of a ToC: how strategic and how realistic has to be a ToC to be practical and at the same time energizing the stakeholders
- When working with various partners in charge of different sub-ToCs how to build a common view of the integrated ToC, in particular the feedback loops among the various sub ToCs.
- The methodology combines LFA, collaborative and adaptive management. But which is the right balance between planning consistency and flexibility. The role of the facilitator is key and trade-off will happen and decisions have to be taken on the spot.

5.2. Regarding how to implement it

a. The Do's

- Move the approach beyond personalities (individuals with a systemic approach where this ToC approaches works better because fits on them).
- When developing ToCs be prepared to invest time in "learning by doing". Once the participants (professionals and community members) understand the technique, it flows easily
- To use M&E questions, instead of indicators as backbone of M&E, is a quite new approach in M&E. It needs face-to-face practical training. People try to repack new tools in the ones that they know ("new wine in old bottle")
- We can not avoid time required and trainer of trainers. A good manual or any written material is not enough. Each group needs a trained person as facilitator. This is important to communicate the principles behind and adapt the methodology to local reality. Local NGOs still are very good to describe activities but difficult to move them to discuss results: the ToC is a good tool to help on that.
- Make aware your managers of the cost and reward of the process to give you the time and resources to do it: Build good examples of sucess
- You have to accept move at the pace of local partners and communities if you want to build ownership and trust.

- Do separate meetings with community members and technicians and/or prepare ad-hoc methodologies according to local capacities.
- The ToC motivates rigorous data collection. By test it, through M&E it demands analysis and for that, evidence is required. So this M&E system is an incentive to generate and value evidence.

b. The challenges

- To implement and learn from the integrated big picture, the global ToC for the landscape as an outcome framework, when working with different partners that work only in particular sub-ToCs
- Trade-offs in terms of sizable opportunity, causality and external validity are unavoidable (Margolious et al. 2008). Landscapes are complex spaces with dynamic processes. This is a challenge for an evaluation model as you learn through implementation and so the "theory of change" is adjusted. We have to acknowledge it.
- Capacities at local level to apply data collection and processing techniques with rigor could be low: in most LLS sites interviews, survey and focus groups are the only ones widely named, but even those are not applied always with a minimum rigueur due to the limited training and experience in using under minimum standards. More participatory techniques like ranking matrix are not known (even though people mention PRA as a package). In this context, the LLS M&E system, discussed below, recognizes trade-offs in terms of precision versus local ownership.
- Implementing M&E is a process: how to keep all partners on the loop for long periods… the importance of the periodic meeting of partners and incentives (an action-learning approach)
- There is no "free lunch". A ToC M&E needs resources to be implemented (i.e. time, budget, human resources)

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