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Conceptualising, achieving and measuring impact

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Abstract

Sustaining and increasing the contribution of small-scale fisheries to poverty reduction, food and nutrition security requires a three-dimensional approach: conceptualising, achieving and measuring impact. This paper presents preliminary options and emerging ideas for the FISH CGIAR Research Program, Flagship 2 proposal (small-scale fisheries) to consider for improving conceptualisation, achievement and measurement of research and development impact. Through a series of relevant examples connected with the FISH CGIAR Research Program theory of change, the paper demonstrates how a better understanding and reflection on research outputs, research outcomes and development outcomes can avoid confusion in these result statements in the visualised impact pathway of each research stream/cluster of activities within the FISH CGIAR Research Program. Each research activity has its own vision and a story to tell as to how 'change' will happen (originally captured in the change mechanisms described in the CGIAR Research Program proposal). These should be succinct statements of the research outputs and research outcomes, and how they lead to development outcomes, laid out as a theory of change. It is important for the FISH CGIAR Research Program to consider intermediate links ('what it takes' to reach there) between these elements. These intermediate links have the potential to better define and build the logic within the theory of change, and also can help the CGIAR Research Program in understanding missing links (if any). In practical terms, they are the change mechanisms and associated strategies utilised by the program. Also, assumptions and risks need to be defined to ensure that the proposed pathway of change is grounded in reality and that risk management strategies are implemented and monitored. Additionally, one to three 'indicators' are required at each result level (output, research outcome and development outcome), which can then be linked to system-level outcomes and intermediate development outcomes. This approach allows for greater reflection on how systemic change can happen, which can address the Flagship project 2 critique regarding weak articulation of the understanding of complexity of systematic change in SSF. It can help to meet donor requirements for clarity on the CGIAR Research Program's research and development contribution. Achieving impact will require a 'development outcome' focus in annual planning and budgeting, and diligent planning of annual milestones. The CGIAR Research Program can also consider cluster-wise allocation and depiction of budgets on various clusters of activities within a flagship. Measurement of impact in the CGIAR Research Program is challenging, given the diversity of research streams, data and reporting requirements. Therefore it necessitates application of a systematic and standardised approach in a knowledge-to-action sequence. Utility orientation in any measurement or monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is critical for ensuring that it contributes to both accountability and learning aspects. Cascaded M&E approach can be considered by the CGIAR Research Program. Cascaded M&E allows tracking of a knowledge-to-action sequence, starting at research activity or cluster level and then building up an aggregated picture. This could allow for collection, reflection and generation of knowledge at various geo-levels: site, country, regional and global. Overall, the paper proposes provisional options and ideas to develop an effective M&E system that is less 'report-based' and more of a support to 'pursuing science'.

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