CCAFS reporting and evaluation in a results-based management framework

Key Points:

• Reporting and evaluation are key mechanisms of project progress to demonstrate, encourage and incentivize the shift towards an evaluative, outcome- and learning-focused organizational culture.

• A standardized mechanism in support of the workflow that guides the partners involved along the process is desirable. Working towards an iterative and flexible online system is very helpful, i.e., programs such as Excel or Word have limitations in the context of these complex programmatic workflows and processes.

• Size matters - whether we do this for a few projects (<ten within a thematic flagship) or a bigger program (with nearly 100 projects with research, engagement or capacity emphases and operating at different scales), or even for a number of programs (with even more complexity of the research and development context). It makes sense to start with few projects, but it does mean that different nuances will need to be considered for a larger-sized program.

• Constant balancing and triangulating of different perspectives is needed - what is absolutely needed versus what it would be nice to have - to keep it lean and practical, but also to be able to deliver meaningful numbers with their qualitative explanations.

• Integrative complex research for development programs will require a different operational results-based management system than commodity based ones, if both are to perform at their best.

• Buy-in, support and consensus from the top is key for the process to evolve into enabling, fostering and facilitating innovations and demand-driven outcome-focused research for development.

Background

The CGIAR Research Program on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (CCAFS) is spearheading the shift towards a consistent results-based, outcome-focused program with an allied project management system that starts from the planning of projects through to their implementation, reporting and performance evaluation. Learning is instrumental in the CCAFS Monitoring and Evaluation system. Previous learning briefs covered the introduction of impact pathways and
theories of change in the planning of projects across the program’s regions, and insights from the results-based management trial projects. This document summarizes the learning and makes suggestions concerning the reporting and evaluation part of the impact pathway-based project management cycle, including the evaluation process of the trial projects. The lessons should be applicable at program management level to support interdisciplinary, multi-scalar research for development projects across a number of thematic areas (flagships) and regional contexts.

Results-based management trial evaluation

For the evaluation of the 2014 results-based management (RBM) trial projects, each RBM trial project was evaluated using four criteria with different weights, as follows:

- Progress towards outputs, 25%
- Progress towards outcomes, 35%
- Reflection of CCAFS principles (quality of partnerships, communications, gender), 20%
- Response of team to the unexpected, ability to adapt and self-reflect, 20%

Each project was evaluated by the respective Regional Program Leader (RPL), a member of the Coordinating Unit (CU), an external evaluator, the respective Flagship Program Leader (FPL), and self-evaluated by the Project Leader (PL). In this way an average score was calculated and the traffic light system used to indicate need for adjustments. The evaluation from four different perspectives was to ensure assessment of and support for quality on context (are we doing the right thing?), content (are we doing what we do right?), management (does this fit within and contribute to our program goals?), and external communications (do we also make sense to others?). Self-evaluation was left for the project leaders to do, and it was also up to them to decide how much inclusion and input they requested from project team members. Synthesis of scores and reports was done by the Management Liaison for the RBM trial. For the project teams of the trial, we also offered webinars to help familiarize them with the various reporting elements.

The way forward for the overall CCAFS program

In considering how we should undertake the evaluation process in 2015 and beyond for the CCAFS program as a whole, one key consideration is that what worked for six projects may not be appropriate for over 90. Another is the need to take on board the suggestions and comments of project leaders and center contact points during meetings in Montpellier, where this is appropriate. The overall suggestion, however, is to follow a similar process to that done for the 2014 RBM trial projects, with a few improvements to be considered.

**Project evaluation criteria**

We suggest we use the four criteria above and add one related to the quality of reporting, with adjusted weights. The Table 1 shows the five criteria, their weight and the source where the information would come from for evaluation. If an evaluator is unable to score a certain criterion, she/he will use 3 (out of 5) as a neutral score. (See Table 1)

**Who evaluates the projects**

Maintaining a similar composition of evaluators as for the RBM trial, to ensure that we cover quality of content within an outcome-focused context and adjustments to consider the larger amount of projects:

- Evaluators - respective FPL and RPL, CU representative, and create a pool

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What worked well</th>
<th>What to improve</th>
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<tr>
<td>- Overall, the process was relatively efficient and worked quite well.</td>
<td>- Everyone had to work with excel spreadsheets, which was a real pain. For 2015, this is not an issue, as reporting will be done in the revised CCAFS online platform for Planning and Reporting (P&amp;R).</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Reporting along impact pathway elements worked better than anticipated.</td>
<td>- Not all the projects took reporting requirements seriously; we propose adding a “quality of reporting” criterion.</td>
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<td>- Asking for reflection and learning was taken up by most projects.</td>
<td>- In designing the reporting, we recognized the need to revisit the P&amp;R structure – for example, moving elements from activity to project level to avoid micro-management.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- The timeline was realistic and submission times for each step were followed.</td>
<td>- We need better links in the system between a project and its deliverables, so that evaluators can (randomly or otherwise) check the quality of products, and help CCAFS identify key outputs.</td>
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of external evaluators with thematic and regional experience

- Weights - evaluators are equally weighted.

- Self-evaluation of project leader to encourage learning and gauging their project's performance. However, this is kept separately from the overall evaluation score and used for learning iterations.

- A simple process for dealing with highly variable evaluations - negotiation among CCAFS core team members, with the director as the final arbiter.

Traffic lights for project evaluation

Along with the detailed scores for each of the above criteria a traffic light is assigned to indicate:

- **Green** for projects that made good progress and that evaluators rated positively overall.
  - Release of next payment is triggered through a green traffic light evaluation.

- **Yellow** for projects that made some progress, but evaluators had several comments and suggestions for improvements that need to be kept an eye on.
  - Follow-up on given recommendations at the latest at the next reporting period (and bilaterally through the periodic interaction with CCAFS Program Management Committee (PMC) members that happen anyway). Incentives should be considered as to how best to raise the project to green status.
  - Release of the next payment will be made. It is key for the next round of annual reporting and evaluation that the project is not slipping but shows improvements and responsiveness to suggestions for improvement.

- **Red** for projects that have not made enough progress and where evaluators raise serious concerns, with formulated corrective actions to be done within the next six months.
  - Next payment releases are delayed until the project is assessed to be on track again after six months.
  - If a project fails to address corrective actions within the given six month period, PMC has the means to give the project more time or stop it altogether.
  - Close mentoring and support of red projects is required by the Management Liaison.

What constitutes green/yellow/red scores needs to be decided once we have done this for the whole portfolio during the 2015 reporting cycle.

Center evaluation

Centre evaluation is based partly on project scores and financials including bilaterals that are raised by the center. We evaluate project success as a team effort, i.e. a center or project partner does not get scored individually and all receive the same score. Center will be evaluated and ranked based on criterias, weight and source of evaluation (see Table 2)

The center evaluation will need adjustment according to the requirements given from the consortium Office in Phase 2.

**Bonus allocation**

Bonus allocation is made to centers (not to projects). The basic intention is to keep the bonus allocation process lean.

- The top three rated centers receive a bonus allocation (assuming we have bonuses to distribute). Disbursement is kept to a maximum of three centers to ensure the amounts are attractive. Distribution: 43%, 33% 23% of the total pot. And for smaller centers we award percentage bonuses based on a maximum of 30% of the center’s annual W1&2 budget.

- Contact points are responsible for bonus allocation towards its top performing CCAFS projects and contribution towards CCAFS outcomes.

**Operationalization mechanism**

The current plan is to build project and center evaluation into the CCAFS planning and reporting (P&R) online platform, with user profiles for project evaluation, automated compilation of reports, and processes for dealing with follow ups, such as in the case of a project receiving a red traffic light. The conceptual development for all this is being undertaken now. As we did for the trial, we can offer webinars to project leaders during the next reporting cycle.

**Next steps**

- Finalizing conceptual development of the P&R online platform along the suggested processes, testing with volunteers and implementing agreed final version.

- During 2015 reporting, we need to define appropriate cut-off scores for the traffic lights, while recognizing that these may need to be somewhat flexible.

- Put together a pool of potential external evaluators, with regional and thematic expertise and decide how many to use in a given year.
Conclusions

The CCAFS RBM trial with the six projects under the Flagship “Policies and institutions for climate resilient food systems” provided a good opportunity to design and test the reporting as an effective mechanism for capturing results and progress towards delivering outcomes, as well as learning. Applying this framework to the whole program portfolio of more than 90 projects is a challenge though. Creating space for learning is key so that lessons regarding the application on the wider scale, can be taken on for refining the overall process. It is key to see this as a continuous, iterative process – there is no ready-made system to use. Thus, lessons are being documented and are continuously translated into the conceptual revisions of the CCAFS online planning and reporting platform. It is important to plan for enough time, allow for the changes to take place and monitor the changes resulting from it to be able to follow the positive effects of the introduction of an RBM and adaptive management approach.

At this stage, early evidence suggests that interdisciplinary and different team compositions of the projects, flexibility to respond to emerging opportunities within project planning, documenting learning and justification for management changes are welcomed by the project teams. It allows them to adjust better to identified needs once the implementation of a project has started and interaction with a wide range of stakeholder starts happening. However, it is also important to note that projects are at different stages in the process, some take an impact pathway / theory of change / results-based management approach on board earlier than others. Moving towards this new way of working takes time and resources and it is likely to take at least one planning and reporting cycle to bear fruit.

It is the responsibility of program management to develop enabling mechanisms so that adaptive management can happen to empower teams to learn and improve upon their actions. It is key that projects and the program learns about what works and what does not with a good analysis of why. Providing the analysis as justification for their proposed adapted plans, to be evaluated by the program management, ensures that adaptive management is used to help strengthen the program’s capacity to be innovative, participatory, and results and outcome oriented. Program management plays a facilitating role once the system is put in place to support these iterative processes between projects and program. In its own interest the program is strengthening capacity, such as through webinars and an M&E support pack.

To go beyond delivering outputs (solid scientific results) and measure projects and programs by their contribution towards outcomes (behavioral changes manifested in knowledge, attitudes, skills and practices) requires a lot of engagement, interaction and iteration with a wider group of people ideally right from the beginning. This does come at a cost and shows mostly in higher transaction costs than a traditional output-focused project or program. We think it is worth the investment when contributing outcome-focused research for development. Getting buy-in from all stakeholders is critical to the success of the investment.

Assumptions made within the disbursement of a bonus allocation to Centers:

- In anticipation of fostering a CCAFS approach to a wide range of partnerships, non-CG partners, who are not considered eligible for bonuses directly, the centers are responsible to take this into account when using the bonus allocation as an incentivizing mechanism.

- Similar, there is little incentive for projects to perform well if their influence as to how the awarded bonus is allocated is limited. Mechanisms to ensure allocation of bonus through centers to respective projects is difficult to enact, but encouraged.

- If we only have a small bonus pot: Centers find it cumbersome to deal with smaller amounts of bonus. Projects may have more flexibility in identifying ideas that could be added to project activities, and can probably make good use of small amounts of additional funds, enabling them to follow innovative, opportunistic and/or strategic leads that were not anticipated at project planning. In this way, the bonus could be used as an innovation fund. As above, mechanisms will depend on appropriately collegial center behavior.

- Additionally, we are looking into non-monetary incentives especially for the project teams.
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Progress towards outputs</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>P&amp;R: Clusters of Activities (CoA)(^1) synthesis; quality of deliverables via ranking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Progress towards outcomes | 35% | • P&R: target delivery, progress towards outcomes  
• P&R: Degree to which project is reporting outcomes in relation to contractually committed  
• For FPL/RPL: general knowledge of project progress and contribution to strategic program outcomes |
| Reflection of CCAFS principles | 15% | • P&R: Quality of gender and social inclusion section in project report  
• P&R: Degree to which project promotes CCAFS through communications and engagement  
• P&R: Degree to which project is active and participating in inter-center CCAFS or cross-CRP activities  
• Financial report: % budget allocated to partnerships |
| Response of team to the unexpected, ability to adapt and self-reflect | 15% | • P&R: Evidence of critical self-reflection (e.g. ability to realize emerging opportunities) |
| Quality of reporting, including the submission of deliverables and making them accessible | 15% | • P&R: empty boxes, too much copy and paste, clarity of content reporting, ‘lip service’ |

\(^1\) Previously these were called major output groups (MOGs), i.e. clusters of outputs, but got changed to clusters of activities as this is the wording the Consortium uses in its call for Phase 2 concept notes.

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<tr>
<td>Performance and contributions towards CCAFS outcomes through their projects progress towards outputs</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>Take all project scores that a center is involved with, and weight the center score by the total percentage budget associated with the project. The center score would be made up of the weighted sum-of-project scores plus the criteria under financial criteria.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Financials | 40% | % budget allocation to gender and social inclusion (by quartiles across projects, across centres) -- 5%  
% budget allocation to partners (bottom quartile, lower quartile, upper quartile, highest quartile) -- 15%  
% bilateral or W3 budget (bottom quartile, lower quartile, upper quartile, highest quartile) -- 20% |

Acknowledgements
We aim to practice what we preach. This briefing series is the product of an on-going social learning process — the Climate Change and Social Learning initiative (CCSL) — between the CCAFS team and its partners, in which knowledge has been co-constructed through many different channels, including workshops, the CCSL ‘sandbox’, and social media. Many thanks to everyone who has participated in this process so far and to those who continue to do so.

CCSL Partners:

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