

Building a credible M&E system: how can a Theory of Change help?

 Vidya Rangan, Manager, Impacts Programme

What is ISEAL?

Global membership association for sustainability standards - 21 members including RSPO

Our mission

To strengthen sustainability standards systems for the benefit of people and the environment



The value of M&E for a sustainability standard

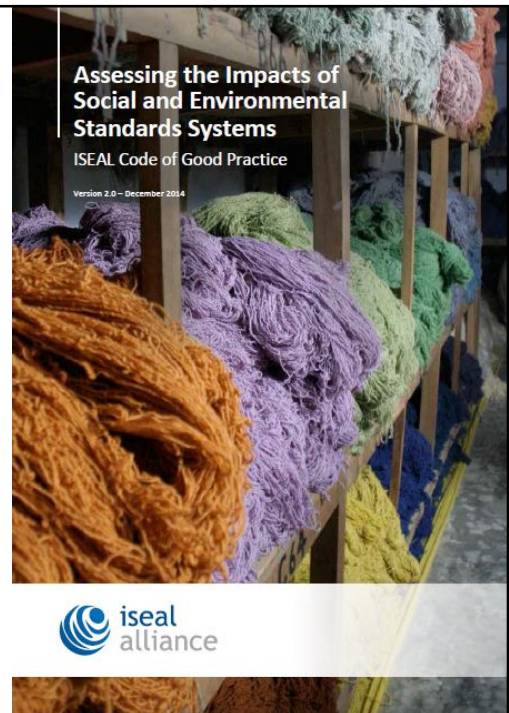
- It helps understand and measure the difference the standard hopes to make
- It helps demonstrate your impacts
- It helps gather regular data on priority indicators
- It helps the system learn, improve and be more focused and effective
- It is intrinsically linked to the credibility of a standard system



M&E linked to Credibility

ISEAL's Credibility Principles (2013)

- Sustainability ←
- Relevance ←
- Rigour ←
- Engagement
- Impartiality
- Transparency ←
- Accessibility
- Truthfulness
- Efficiency
- Improvement ←





A credible standard is backed by a robust M&E system.

But credibility is also about using the system to demonstrate impacts by putting out evidence.

It's no longer just about evidence but *specific* evidence *attributable* to that standard

Photo: Processing palm oil © Bremen Yong, RSPO

ISEAL research in 2015

What information & data are businesses looking for about the impacts of sustainability standards?

Top impact themes for palm-oil

Land tenure and related issues

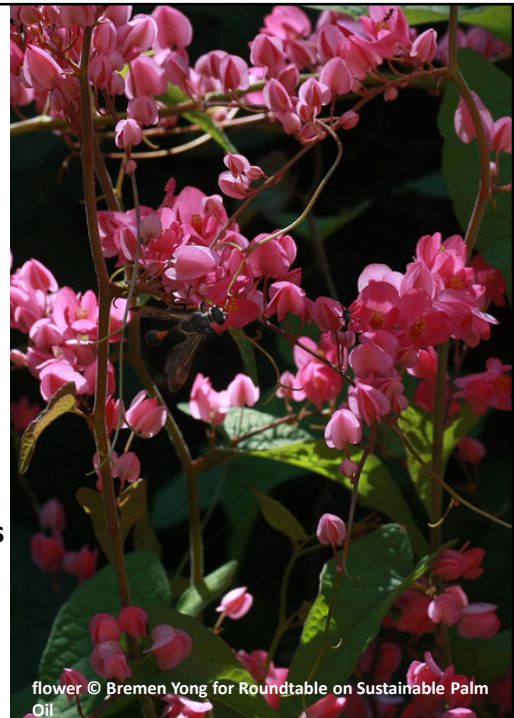
Tropical deforestation

Habitat conservation

Benefits to smallholders (vs plantations)

Productivity

Also, more evidence needed on the business benefits of standards – risk management, supply chain management



flower © Bremen Yong for Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil

What is a Theory of Change?

How can it help build a credible M&E system?



Key elements of an M&E system

- Articulation of intended change
- Defined set of indicators
- Performance monitoring
 - Regular and built into operations
- In-depth evaluations
 - Explore issues not captured or explained in monitoring and ideally with a counterfactual
- Reporting and sharing
- Learning & improvement loop
- Transparency & public disclosure



Certified fish © Aquaculture Stewardship Council

A Theory of Change helps lay the foundation and build the framework for a robust M&E system.

Definition:

A Theory of Change articulates both **what** impact or change the standard is hoping to achieve and **how** its work brings about that change.

WHAT → specificity of changes intended (short, medium and long-term)

HOW → attributability of change to your standard, linked to your interventions



Theory of change as a process and product

Value as a process

- Engaging stakeholders in deliberate thinking
- Defining and agreeing a shared vision of how the system creates change and reaches its goals
- Agreeing on work, interventions transparently
- Reviewing work and results regularly together

Value as a product

- A roadmap of how to achieve long-term goals
- Strategic framework for implementing work
- Basis for monitoring, evaluation, and learning

Once done, a theory of change has multiple uses.

- Monitoring & evaluation
- Prioritize metrics
- Strategic planning
- Resource optimisation
- Communication
- Learning & improvement
- Fundraising



Photo © U. Roberto Romano, courtesy of GoodWeave

Developing a theory of change can be a long, difficult process.

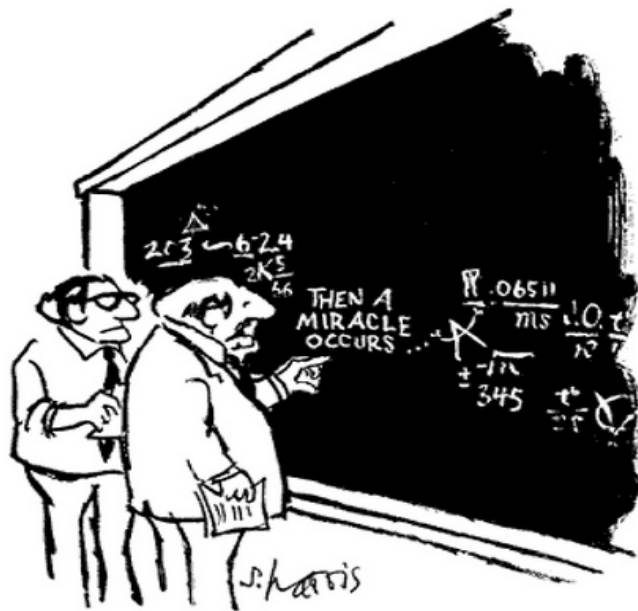
But it is often cited by ISEAL members as one of the most important contributions made by the ISEAL Codes.

Effective stakeholder input is key to a credible & representative theory of change.



Better Cotton Field in Turkey © Better Cotton Initiative

**Credible standards
get explicit and
provide evidence
about the 'miracles'
they make happen !**



"I think you should be more explicit here in step two."

Thank you!



vidya@isealalliance.org

Maldives © Nice and Serious for MSC