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.

ISEAL research in 2015

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

Top impact themes for palm-oil

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land tenure and related issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tropical deforestation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habitat conservation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits to smallholders (vs plantations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Productivity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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.
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