

Contribution analysis for adaptive management

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Key messages

- Contribution analysis for adaptive management (CA4AM) enables programmes to work with theories of change (ToCs) in a practical, reflexive way.
- It is particularly useful for programmes operating in conditions of complexity, when it is difficult to discern attribution and when systems-level change is the goal.
- A range of enabling factors help CA4AM to be used most effectively, including contractual flexibility; embedded monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL); and supportive leadership.



Executive summary

This briefing note shares practical learning on the use of contribution analysis for adaptive management (CA4AM).¹ We examine how the approach enables programmes to work with theories of change (ToCs) in a practical, reflexive way, and how, combined with assessing evidence of a programme's contribution to change, its findings can inform programme adaptation. We examine both how and to what extent CA enables AM through the experiences of four large complex programmes all working towards systems-level change and employing a structured process of reflection on ToC.

The experiences examined suggest that CA4AM is particularly useful for programmes operating in conditions of complexity, when it is difficult to discern attribution and when systems-level change is the goal. We share three areas of learning about how to use CA4AM to enable adaptive decision-making: (1) using a structured process to examine a programme's ToC and identify specific contribution claims is useful at a level that is large enough to compare outcomes across various interventions and activities, such as portfolio level, and when these outcomes are meaningful for management and within their span of influence; (2) co-developing ToCs with stakeholders at the outset increases the likelihood of shared ownership of the process, identifying with the ToC and consequently being more engaged in defending and/or taking it apart when using evidence of contribution to inform adaptation; and (3) the formulation and critical analysis of contribution claims between similar interventions provides decision-makers with evidence to motivate adaptive decision-making. We found that CA4AM is best used when the following enabling factors are present:

- **Contractual flexibility:** contractual arrangements can make or break a programme's ability to make learning actionable. Specifically, rigid funding

modalities that require specific outputs or immediate outcomes to be generated in order to receive payment are the least enabling for CA4AM.

- **Length and scale of programmes:** programmes with smaller projects that have a shorter duration than the programme as a whole are especially well-placed for CA4AM. It makes it possible for programmes to keep to contractual arrangements made at the beginning of the project, while still leveraging learning from the different projects on how they contribute to change.
- **Embedded monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL):** an internal MEL directly linked to programme management will achieve greater levels of trust and better communication, which is important for the iterative use of ToCs. Trust builds co-ownership of the ToC and the evidencing process. External MEL teams should work to build trust and develop communication channels with the programme implementers in order to become as embedded as possible.
- **Intention to generate evidence for learning:** when a programme begins from a weak or contested evidence base about what might work, there is more impetus to use a theory-based approach such as CA4AM to evidence the contribution as it emerges, and learn how to improve this. In these cases, CA4AM may support decision-makers to uncover and exploit promising outcome trajectories early on.
- **Leadership embraces iterative ToC:** the additional level of investment and buy-in needed to translate findings and learning into effective decision-making requires supportive leadership, especially when the ToC needs to be adjusted radically in the light of the evidence that becomes available through CA4AM, which is typical for complex programmes working in rapidly changing contexts.

1 This briefing note was originally written for the Global Learning for Adaptive Management (GLAM) initiative's programme donors: the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). In light of the closure of the GLAM programme, it was agreed to make the note publicly available. It is targeted at other donors and practitioners who would like to know more about these methods and their practical implementation.

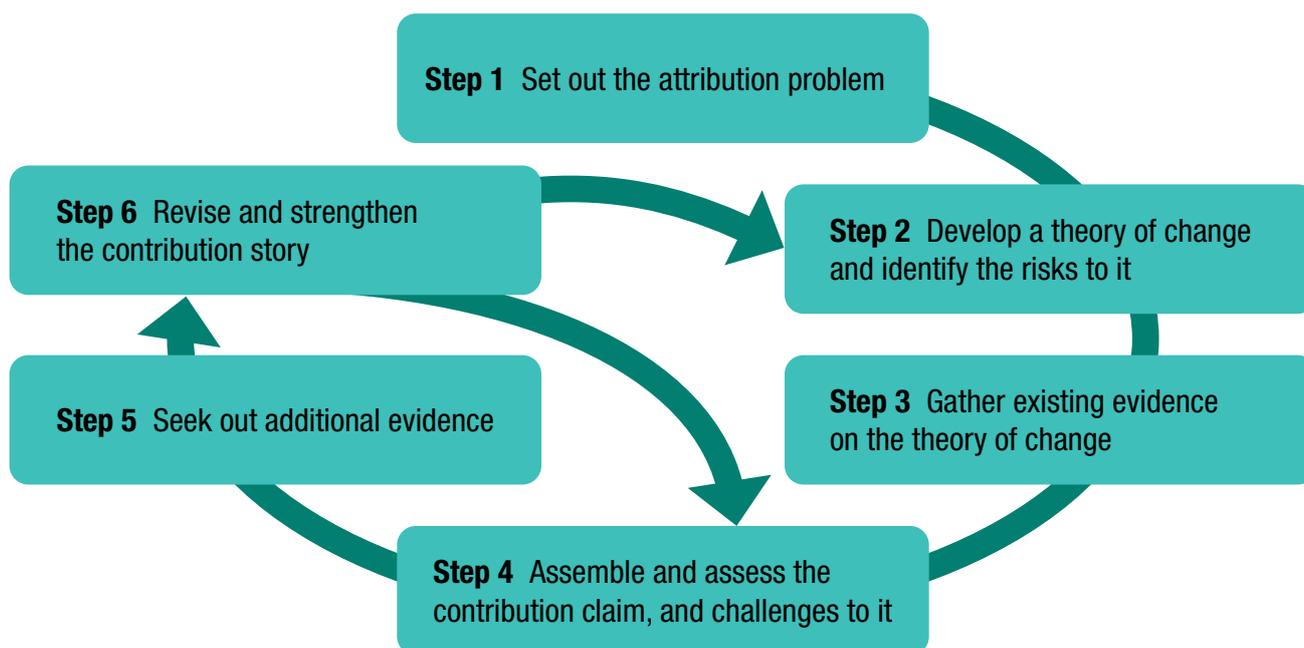
Introduction

Contribution analysis (CA) is an evaluation method developed by Mayne (2001) that helps users arrive at conclusions regarding the contribution that programmes have made to particular outcomes. It is part of a broader family of evaluation approaches known as theory-based (or theory-driven) evaluation (e.g. Weiss, 1997), which are increasingly used in response to the challenges of evaluating complex programmes. They focus on verifying and refining understanding about the links between short-term and longer-term outcomes, and do not treat the processes which lead to change as a black box, as, for example, may be done in (quasi) experimental impact evaluation that only measures impact on ultimate outcomes, irrespective of the way they are being generated. Mayne (2001; 2008) identified six steps to verify and refine a ToC as the backbone of CA. In adaptive programmes, when the ToC is uncertain and contested, the steps are best depicted as an iterative cycle of learning, with two learning loops (Argyris and Schon, 1974). One loop – step 6 to step 4 – reflects on the assumptions in the ToC, and a second loop – step 6 to step 2 – reconsiders the ToC more radically (see Figure 1).

An evaluation using CA begins by depicting the intended change process as a sequence of events, through developing a ToC. Through the process, specific contribution stories – linked to critical causal assumptions in the ToC – are examined and evidenced. This can help uncover not just *if* but *how* an intervention contributes to outcomes and ultimately has impact. Iterative use of ToC within CA aligns with the trend in MEL practice of using ToC as a *process* ‘which applies critical thinking to the design, implementation and evaluation of initiatives and programmes intended to support change in their contexts’ (Vogel, 2012: 3). Through this espoused iterative process, ToC becomes more than a basic narrative or a ‘boxes and arrows’ product.

The CA approach we examine here adds to existing (although not always well implemented) ToC practice by ‘zooming in’ on critical causal links in the impact pathways in order to assess how an intervention contributes (or fails to contribute) to change. Applying this iterative approach to ToC from the outset of a programme and returning to it throughout implementation (what we call CA4AM) is where the adaptive potential lies. Refining ToCs through evidencing how a

Figure 1 Iterative use of theories of change in contribution analysis



Source: Based on Mayne (2008) and Ton et al. (2019)

programme is contributing to change has the potential to be a rigorous approach to adaptive management (adaptive rigour). It incentivises organisations to identify, work through and refine areas of contestation in the ToC, and can open up opportunities to accelerate impact by illustrating how pathways are emerging in reality. In other words, CA4AM can help facilitate the collection of, reflection on and use of high-quality data and analysis in adaptive decision-making.

There is scant, but emerging, evidence of the use of CA4AM. Until now it has mainly been used in mid- or endline evaluations to verify whether causal inferences can be made about the contribution of an intervention or programme to specific outcomes. This paper presents learning from the MEL experiences of four programmes that embodied elements of CA4AM in their practice. For each of the four programmes examined, we carried out a review of internal learning documents and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) reports provided by programme teams, as well as publicly available reports. We then conducted semi-structured group discussions with key stakeholders,

reviewed project documents and held follow-up interviews for clarifications.

Understanding programme contribution to systemic change

The four programmes we examined are described in Table 1. All are multi-million-pound undertakings, operating in conditions of complexity and uncertainty. In none of the programmes was it clear in advance with precision what interventions would achieve results. They all explicitly took a systems perspective and worked with multiple stakeholders with various interventions within specific projects to address critical constraints and leverage change in the system. Each of these programmes operates in spaces that are influenced by the actions of many other development programmes, as well as the private sector and government, and the overall health of the national and global economy. Moreover, the interventions within each of the programmes operate across contexts and scales. This complexity means that it is difficult to determine whether and how the programme is achieving

Table 1 Description of the four programmes

Programme	The Private Enterprise Programme Ethiopia (PEPE)	Sector Partnerships Programme of the Rainforest Alliance (SPP RA)	Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia (CLARISSA)	CGIAR Research Programme on Aquatic Agricultural Systems (CRPAAS)
Programme focus	Seeks to create employment and income for the poor by addressing constraints in the horticulture, leather and textiles sectors using a market systems development approach	Taking a sector-wide approach to working with farmers, civil society and governments to tackle issues of child labour, deforestation and climate change resilience in the coffee, cocoa and tea value chains	A participatory evidence- and innovation- generation programme aimed at reducing the worst forms of child labour in supply chains	An agricultural research-in-development programme focused on improving livelihoods of the poor and marginalised in aquatic agricultural systems
Geographic scope	Ethiopia	Operating in nine countries globally	Specific sectors in Bangladesh, Nepal and Myanmar	Specific systems in Zambia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, the Philippines and the Solomon Islands
Implementation phase	Seven-year programme in final phase 2013–2020	Five-year programme in final phase 2016–2020	Four-year programme in starting phase 2019–2023	Five-year programme ended in 2016
Donor	FCDO	Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs	FCDO	CGIAR Fund (multiple donors)

change at the intended outcome and impact levels. The management teams recognised the complexity of their programmes and explicitly embraced adaptive management.²

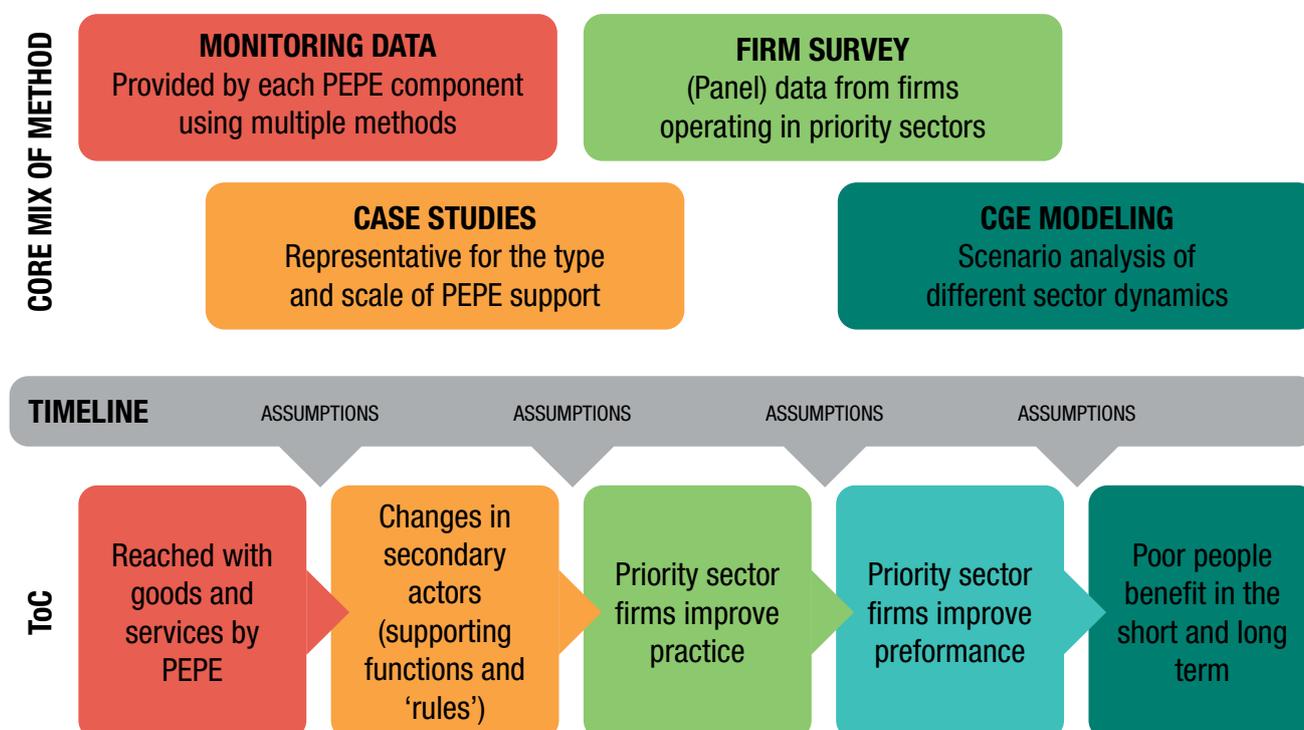
Understanding the extent to which and how programme activities are contributing towards achieving the desired end changes in the system overall *as the change unfolds* is critical for adaptive decision-making. Appreciating the programme’s contribution during implementation helps in figuring out what the programme is doing well, where it is failing and what new activities it may need to take on board as opportunities for change in the systems become visible. CA4AM helps decision-makers to implement a structured MEL process that provides information to periodically adapt programmes through critically building and verifying contribution claims. Doing so, CA4AM supports decision-makers’ ability to uncover and respond to promising outcome trajectories early on, in situations where what works remains largely unknown.

Contribution analysis as an approach

Operationalising contribution analysis for adaptive management

CA4AM is a framework and does not prescribe the use of specific types of data- or evidence-gathering methods a priori. Every time a contribution story is built and assessed, appropriate data-collection methods are designed and deployed based on the critical assumptions that are being tested. In this way, CA provides a general framework through which the programme is asked to ‘build a compelling case with evidence from which it is reasonable to conclude with confidence that the intervention has made a contribution and why’ (Mayne, 2012). A wide variety of data and methods can be used, including qualitative and quantitative data, case studies, surveys, qualitative comparative analysis and outcome harvesting. Table 2 illustrates the range of methods used to capture and evidence contribution in each of the four programmes.

Figure 2 Example of mixed methods in a contribution analysis evaluation



Source: Adapted from Koleros et al. (2018)

² See Yohannes (2020) for PEPE; Apgar et al. (2020) for CLARISSA; and Douthwaite et al. (2014) for CRP AAS.

Table 2 Application of CA4AM across the four programmes

Programme	The Private Enterprise Programme Ethiopia (PEPE)	Sector Partnerships Programme of the Rainforest Alliance (SPP RA)	Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia (CLARISSA)	CGIAR Research Programme on Aquatic Agricultural Systems (CRP AAS)
Specific methods and data sources used to unpack and evidence programme contribution	Monitoring system for results management, six comparative case studies using process tracing and key informant interviews, quasi-experimental firm-level survey data and macro-economic modelling	Outcome harvesting to see what changed and how partnerships contributed to the change through participatory workshops, mid-term review of causal assumptions through case studies, endline evaluation with key informant interviews	Outcome harvesting, Participatory Action Research, realist evaluation to uncover what works, for whom and why through CMO (context, mechanisms and outcomes) configurations	Outcome evidencing (adaptation of outcome harvesting often combined with most significant change (see Paz-Ybarnegaray and Douthwaite, 2017) to uncover outcome trajectories, key informant interviews, process-monitoring data
How the ToC was developed	Co-constructed in the inception phase in joint workshops of the evaluation and programme team, reviewed and refined in each annual review; detailed, nested results chains for the sector plans and any of the 60-plus interventions to be supported as part of a results-based monitoring system	Pre-project process to define impact pathways, participatory workshops including SPP RA and partners	Participatory design workshops and evidence reviews	Participatory diagnosis and design workshops
Levels it was applied at	Programme-, sector- and intervention-level ToCs	Global-, country-level and thematic ToCs	Programme-, workstream- and country-level ToCs	Programme, system and individual initiative ToCs
How it was revisited	In Quarterly Sector Reviews, annual reviews and during the external midterm and endline evaluation	Participatory annual reviews, external evaluation	Participatory after-action reviews across scales six-monthly and annually	Participatory after-action reviews across scales six-monthly and annually

All four programmes include methods to observe outcomes and make sense of how they were generated. In the PEPE example, a selection of mixed methods were used to evidence the relevance/accuracy of specific assumptions along the ToC, as well as the degree to which changes at each level of the ToC were observed in practice (see Figure 2). This was part of the design of the mid-term evaluation commissioned by the donor. Implemented by an external evaluation team, this focused on contributions to job creation and smallholder incomes.

In the other three programmes, an adaptation of outcome harvesting (Wilson-Grau and Britt, 2012) was used by internal programme MEL teams to capture and describe stories of change

and contribution, and within that method, various appropriate forms of data collection were deployed. In CRP AAS, for example, a typical contribution evidencing plan included key informant interviews and case studies, field visits to verify key indicators such as hectares of crops planted or crop yield data, reviews of process-monitoring data and transcripts of participatory activities with farmers.

Common across programmes was the use of specific review, learning or reflection moments at regular intervals for revisiting ToCs through the use of evidence about contribution claims. These intentional learning moments help programme teams to link findings to actionable learning for programme adaptation. Typically in these

workshops, participants jointly answer questions such as: What outcomes are occurring? Why are these outcomes important to the project? What was the project's contribution to them? What evidence is there to confirm this contribution? The reviews allow programme partners to reflect internally, while also looking out to the overarching objectives and pathways of change they are collectively contributing to.

Box 1 gives examples of contribution claims assessed and how they could enable programme adaptations.

Learning about maximising the adaptive potential of the approach

We share three areas of learning about how to use CA4AM to maximise its adaptive potential through generating and using evidence of contribution claims. As Figure 1 illustrates, ToCs are a central component of CA4AM. All

programme teams emphasised that any CA is only as good as its ToC. Thus, many of our findings reflect – but are not limited to – good ToC practice in general.

A systematic process to identify critical assumptions in nested theories of change

CA4AM works best with nested ToCs that detail key areas within an overarching ToC that provides the rationale for large complex programmes. As shown in Table 2, each of the programmes used several, interlinked ToCs across various levels, from abstract and general to contextualised and specific. In all four programmes there is an optimal point where the best scale is found for learning and adaptation. It seems to be most useful to examine a ToC and identify specific contribution claims at levels that are large enough to observe differences in outcomes that are meaningful for management,

Box 1 Specific examples of evidenced contribution claims

CRP AAS – outcome evidencing identified several trajectories of change that enabled the programme to assess the contribution of the research-in-development approach central to its ToC. One trajectory was around the assumption that using a participatory action research (PAR) mode with farmers would lead to an increase in the confidence and capacity of farmers to implement agricultural research. This pathway, and the specific contribution of the PAR process to it, was evidenced in several of the locations such that programme efforts could focus specifically on building on initial PAR interventions. As the Bangladesh evidencing report stated:

Overall, the results strongly support an assumption that starting with a relatively simple task (testing seed varieties) with a high likelihood of success that can be achieved in a relatively short period of time (one growing season), builds the confidence that farmer researchers need to tackle more complex problems, particularly in aquatic systems.

SPP RA – in reviewing the Uganda country-level ToC, outcome harvesting showed that the programme pilots did produce interesting results at the district level, but were not yet achieving outcomes at the national level. In response to this finding, the country focal person brought on board a new partner to leverage influence at the national level.

PEPE – the mid-term evaluation analysed the monitoring information collected in PEPE in all sub-projects where the programme claimed a contribution to job creation. This verification/evidencing of the ToC benefited from the programme's sophisticated results-based management system. Initially, the process of external scrutiny at annual reviews was somewhat intimidating and a cause of anxiety. This changed when the programme introduced quarterly meetings to reflect on the ToC in each sector with all involved staff, including M&E staff, which gave it 'the chance to become re-attached to the big picture' while asking essentially the same questions as the annual reviews (Yohannes, 2020).

not too abstract and not too detailed. In-depth evidencing of contribution claims seems less useful at the level of a single intervention.

For example, the PEPE programme consists of more than 60 interventions, all with their own results frameworks and ToCs. For each intervention, monitoring data was collected by the programme to track progress towards the expected results. The evaluators selected the sectors with interventions that contributed to job creation and verified the resulting contribution claim, critically examining the process that led to the results. Process tracing – which one of our interviewees described as a fairly intuitive process of asking critical questions about causality – would have been too expensive to verify each of the 60 interventions in depth.³ The process tracing case studies took place at sector level, and only in those sectors where the programme claimed impact at scale. Each intervention was implemented by different consultants in coordination with different private partners or non-governmental organisations (NGOs). These sector-level ToCs, with the nested result chains of the interventions, were also used for PEPE's quarterly sector reviews, and were nested into the overall, more generic programme-level ToC (see Figure 2). The sector level provided the right level of abstraction; a CA at the programme ToC level would have been too abstract to uncover insights relevant for actionable learning and adaptation.

Similarly, in the case of SPP RA the optimal point was the country-level ToC, which could include up to 20 sub-projects. The programme team felt that the project level would have been too small for meaningful reflections on contribution claims, as many projects are embedded within six overarching thematic 'pathways'. By looking at the country-level ToC, they were able to see how all the pathways within a country worked, and whether and how this resulted in synergy.

Co-developing theories of change at the outset

Across all programmes, we found that ToCs become a tool for using evidence of contribution claims – and so using actionable learning to adapt programmes – when key programme stakeholders

are directly involved in the process of developing them. Co-developing ToCs increases the likelihood that stakeholders will feel ownership of the ToC as articulated, will remember it, and will be more engaged in defending and/or taking it apart using evidence of outcomes and contribution during reviews. For CLARISSA, the ToC at programme level was co-developed with the participation of all consortium partners (the change agents) as well as the donor. At country level, the ToCs are being developed with the country teams and will be evidenced with the participation of at-risk children, implementation teams and other change agents in the child labour system using a participatory implementation modality. CRP AAS also co-developed its ToC through its participatory research-in-development approach, which aimed to create a safe dialogic and action space for communities and stakeholders and build collaboration across institutional and 'scale' boundaries. This initial ownership of ToC enabled a richer evaluative process with stakeholders to make use of emergent pathways and contribution claims that were visualised and critically assessed as part of the outcome evidencing process. In both of these programmes, participatory design means that developing ToCs is a process that occurs iteratively within the implementation period itself.

Looking back to look forward

CA4AM looks backwards to feed forward-looking decision-making. CA4AM's structured process of analysis of the current momentum towards change provides decision-makers with ideas for adaptive management. Well-designed ways to document what is happening throughout the life of the programme will help this process of looking back, and help to trace the process that has generated the outcomes. In the use of outcome evidencing in CRP AAS, research to evidence contribution stories included reviews of process documentation related to the various programme activities. In the PEPE example, the extensive monitoring data available on each intervention and firm, collected as part of PEPE's results-based management system, provided invaluable evidence in the CA

3 See Punton and Welle (2015) for further information on process tracing for evaluating complex development programmes.

evaluation. Working with causal ToC with the explicit intention of assessing the plausibility of a contribution claim in the future implies that, from the outset, data collection processes can be put in place to provide information that may be needed to help substantiate contribution claims later down the road.

What does the practice enable?

Box 1 gives specific examples of the types of contribution claims that were evidenced. The question, however, is how important these were in terms of programme adaptation.

One of the major challenges with MEL4AM across the board is that programme learning is often superficial, merely answering the question ‘how well are we doing according to the plan?’. This typically happens where programme managers find themselves within a strict accountability framework. Alternatively, learning could go deeper and answer questions like: ‘Are we doing the right things?’, ‘Are we working with the right partners?’, ‘Are we doing things in the right way?’, ‘Are we working on the right constraints?’ and ‘Are we focused on where change is now emerging?’. Adaptation of the programme in the light of answers to these questions requires the space to make more fundamental changes to the initial design.

The experiences described here show that, when implemented in the early stages of a programme, CA4AM can help identify more promising impact pathways that can be supported, either through a formal moment in the inception phase or the mid-term evaluation, or in a more fluid way in programmes that are highly flexible. The SPP RA example of including a new partner to enable greater influencing at national level is a good instance of how CA4AM can enable programmes to refine their work within the existing space, focused on achieving their original goals. The PEPE example shows how regular reflection on the sector-level ToCs helped staff to see the big picture and be flexible within their articulated goal. There is good evidence, therefore, that CA4AM is well-suited to support the first loop of learning on implementation (between steps 6 and 4 in Figure 1).

Moving to double loop learning (from step 6 back to step 2 in Figure 1), we have seen, is

dependent on the one hand on the strength of the evidence produced on the existing ToC, and on the other requires the room and political will to make radical changes in the ToC, and so the programme. This political will or room for action is not always there, as evidenced in CRP AAS, where in one country the programme manager shut down more radical programme change despite evidence discussed in an after-action review illustrating a clear need for change. Specifically, the evidence suggested that technical initiatives initially designed for the fish value chain were not proving effective, and that a change of tack to work on more political issues of governance would enable greater contribution to change. This highlights that, while CA4AM can potentially bring useful evidence to the surface, flexibility and the right leadership is needed to bring about more radical change.

Enabling factors for contribution analysis for adaptive management

With its emphasis on examining contribution claims through nested ToCs, CA4AM is useful in programmes that address systemic change and are able to invest in a strong MEL design. Within this programming context, four enabling factors for CA4AM were identified. Unsurprisingly, these enabling factors strongly align with those highlighted by previous GLAM work on enabling factors for adaptive management more generally (Ramalingam et al., 2019).

Flexibility of contracting modalities

Our findings echo earlier observations that flexible funding modalities are a make-or-break factor for adaptive programming (e.g. Prieto-Martin et al., 2017). The Rainforest Alliance (RA) team explicitly mentioned the space their donor provided for them to build a MEL approach that relied heavily on annual reviews at the country level:

[Our donor] actually embraces the spirit of change idea. So, I think in that sense we were also lucky that we had the freedom to build our own M&E system for that programme like we did. With many donors, you're just in

a straightjacket, so even if they ask for a theory of change upfront, they won't allow you to deviate from it because you need to comply on a quarterly basis with a lot of targets so you end up checking boxes.

The project examined represent a range of contract modalities, from not requiring predefined results as specific indicators (starting with a ToC but not a logframe) to results-based arrangements that tie payment to delivery of specific results throughout the life of the project. It should not be surprising, therefore, that in the former it is easier to use learning about programme contribution to support adaptation. As one interviewee suggested:

The adaptive iterative part doesn't jive well when you have an output-based contract where you're meant ... to do these things by this date or you're going to get pinged by the donor.

The PEPE mid-term evaluation showed a small contribution to job creation and improving smallholders' incomes. The fact that the attainment of all levels of results – outputs, outcomes and the impact (job creation) – was included in a payment-by-results contract created some tension in the relationship and communication between the internal and external evaluators about the way these were measured or counted in each annual review. The critical condition surfaced here, then, is to ensure sufficient flexibility at the right level of the results chain in programmes that operate in conditions of complexity.

Starting with a contested evidence base

The programmes examined seek to address development problems that have been the subject of research for some time. However, evidence regarding what works in tackling these 'wicked problems' will always be partial. Many moving parts and contextual peculiarities mean that successful activities in one programme are difficult to replicate in new settings and new programmes. For example, in the CLARISSA programme learning around what works in

eliminating the worst forms of child labour still lacks robust evidence. In response, CA4AM is being applied through the child-centred action research programme in order to produce evidence and innovative solutions driven by people's definitions of their own problems (Apgar et al., 2020). The innovation ethos of the programme creates an important opportunity for the evidence of contribution to be used within implementation for AM. In the early stages of a programme where the evidence base is weak, observations from CA4AM can help identify promising outcome trajectories that can be exploited relatively early, compared to waiting for mid-term evaluations.

In the case of SPP RA, with its consciously sector-wide approach, the programme acknowledged that past evaluation work had focused largely on impacts of certification on individual households or farmers, and had not yet focused on the impacts that certification is having on the sector, supply chain and landscape levels. RA wanted to understand how its work is influencing the behaviour of actors towards each other, the functioning of markets and changes at the regulatory and institutional levels. Given challenges with counterfactual designs, as well as the complexity of multiple actors in the certification system, previous evaluation efforts failed to answer questions of how, why and for whom certification was working. RA shifted to an approach resembling CA4AM in order to measure its contribution to sector transformation by revising and refining the ToC to reflect how it envisages this change happening, and then collecting evidence to show whether it is happening in practice, and what the actual contribution is.

Similarly, CRP AAS acknowledged the uncertainty and complexity of interventions seeking to tackle constraints in aquatic agricultural systems. Due to this uncertainty, AAS took a participatory research approach, and understood that many internal and external factors often contribute to the same outcome. Thus, the way to understand contribution along impact pathways within systems was through visualising 'outcome trajectories', described by Boru Douthwaite as 'patterns of interactions between people and institutions and knowledge

technology that lead to outcomes over time’ (personal communication). Uncovering these trajectories early on can provide evidence of interactions that often precede an intervention and sometimes live beyond it, they can suggest avenues for programmes to continue to catalyse change within them and so are important for adaptive decision making.

Trust in, and embeddedness of, evaluation team

Similar to what has already been discussed about embedding MEL within the operational management structures of programmes to enable AM (Arkesteijn et al., 2015; Douthwaite et al., 2017), we found that CA4AM seems to be better able to support adaptation when it is developed and used in-house. This was linked to achieving higher levels of trust, which, as noted previously, is critically important for the iterative use of ToC – with review meetings as core moments for evidence to be discussed, as ‘sense-making events’ (Guijt, 2008) and feeding decision-making for change. There must be co-ownership of the ToC and the evidencing and reviewing process.

Across the programmes we discussed trade-offs between having an internal and external evaluation team carrying out CA4AM. Internal evaluators may be in a better position to effectively use CA4AM because they tend to have a better and more contextualised understanding of the ToC and its operational reality, and how it manifests itself in different interpretations within a large programme. External evaluators can bring additional scrutiny to the design and evidence, and the additional claims to validity this could provide should build more rigour into the evidencing process. The challenge comes when external evaluators create tensions between implementing partners and donors if they bring their own biases to the ToC they wish to evaluate, rather than focusing on bringing programmatic learning from the ToC to the surface.

Our findings suggest that, if an external evaluation team is engaged in a CA4AM process, then time spent on building relationships to ensure trust and alignment in the use of ToC should be prioritised, so as to move towards an external yet still embedded MEL process. Here, the evaluators are viewed as ‘honest brokers’

between the donor and the implementation team, and so might be able to support both programme adaptation and impact evaluation.

Leadership embracing contribution analysis as an approach

Across the examples we found that the more central the idea of learning through evaluating contribution is to the way programme leaders and designers see the added value of CA4AM, the greater its ability to deliver timely and useful evidence for AM. In the CLARISSA programme, participatory MEL within the participatory research groups – which will be fed in as evidence to assess contribution claims alongside outcome harvesting data – is designed precisely with this intention. The evaluation and learning lead is a member of the programme management team, signalling the importance accorded to MEL. The RA experience shows that internally commissioned learning to steer the organisation means that programme teams do not feel threatened by negative results that may surface, and instead use these findings as an opportunity to learn and improve the programme.

As the name ‘CA4AM’ implies, the approach is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Its value lies in enabling adaptive decision-making through evidencing contribution claims throughout implementation. AM has attracted interest from decision-makers in the last few years, yet the ‘how’ of adaptive management remains opaque to many leaders. As this briefing note has shown, CA4AM is a promising structured approach to generate the ToC, evidence and reflection moments needed for AM.

Insights for donors and MEL practitioners

This concluding section offers two high-level recommendations for donors and practitioners interested in applying CA4AM in programmes. First, learning suggests that CA4AM may be most usefully applied at the portfolio level. The strength of the approach lies in helping to understand, not just whether and how a specific programme is contributing to impact, but also what other factors are contributing to the

impact of a programme within a system. It can, therefore, help donors understand what other actors and factors are present that are allowing (or blocking) intended changes at the system level. Such learning seems particularly useful at a portfolio level, for example informing decisions about whether certain interventions/projects merit funding, or by identifying and amplifying new, critical outcome trajectories, such as new combinations of people, incentive structures or technologies. Understanding how a portfolio is contributing to change and what may be blocking it from being effective early on in the programme period can help to adjust and improve long-term outcomes. It could also help donors (and other intervenors) to maximise each other's investments, adapting an initial intervention design to bring greater integration and synergy.

Second, learning suggests that donors can and should facilitate MEL embeddedness in programme management. CA4AM is likely to be more effective when MEL is embedded in programmes, because it brings to the surface specific learning about whether and how a programme is contributing to outcomes. This is most easily achieved when the MEL team is internal, feeding strategic decision-making, and not (only) a data repository to comply with external accountability requirements. However, it may add value to embed an external evaluation team in the MEL system to deepen understanding of the role of the programme in the process of change and contribution to development impact. We suggest that donors play a central role in brokering close relationships between programme teams and externally commissioned evaluators to build synergy in CA4AM.

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