



AgriFoSe2030 Phase 2: Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) strategy



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AgriFoSe2030 Phase 2: Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) strategy

1. Introduction

AgriFoSe2030 is a collaborative, multi-stakeholder programme which aims to support transformation of smallholder farming systems in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and in South and Southeast (SE) Asia. This will enable farmers to tackle food insecurity and increase local economic growth. The programme supports cross-cutting issues concerning the sustainable intensification of smallholder agriculture. This encompasses the engagement of women and youth in practice, together with improving smallholder access to markets and value chains. To do this the programme focuses on translating state-of-the-art science into knowledge relevant for policymakers and practitioners.

Together with partners, the programme has developed four thematic challenges for the second phase of the programme. Each AgriFoSe2030 challenge addresses a specific aspect of agriculture and food security in SSA and South and SE Asia. These challenges also provide the overarching grouping for projects undertaken as part of the programme. The challenges are as follows:

1. Improving access to safe and nutritious food
2. Agricultural productivity and ecosystem functions
3. Science-based innovation and extension
4. Smallholder agriculture within transforming food systems

The programme also includes a management team and a communication and engagement (C&E) team.

2. Overall objective of the AgriFoSe2030 programme

The overall objective of the AgriFoSe2030 programme is to contribute to the social, economic, and environmental sustainability of smallholder farming systems in SSA and South and SE Asia for improved food and nutrition security. The programme works at multiple scales from local to global level. To achieve this overall objective, the programme has set ambitions in the form of outcomes, which are the following:

1. Increase the capacity of scientists to synthesise, analyse, and communicate science with different stakeholders.
2. Increase the use of science-based knowledge in policies and practices.
3. Improve and contribute to increased dialogue and bridging of science, policy, and practice.

In the second phase of AgriFoSe2030 (2020-2024), the programme has chosen to develop a mode of operation that largely integrates a Theory of Change (ToC) approach, further outlined in section 4 and annex 2. A central part of the ToC is the design of a 'change process', with near term and longer-term outcomes leading towards the desired changes and long-term goals of AgriFoSe2030. To ensure that the programme is on its way to achieve these desired changes and goals, a Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) strategy is central and provides an approach to follow-up on the ToC process in a structured way.

3. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) strategy – overview

This document describes the MEL strategy for the second phase of AgriFoSe2030 (2020–2024), including its implementation plan (outlined in Annex 1). The strategy aims to deliver responsible stewardship and assurance to funders by providing regular analysis and evidence of progress, set against outputs and intended outcomes. Furthermore, an effective MEL approach provides a basis for learning, and will help AgriFoSe2030 to communicate externally about its impact.

More specifically, the main objectives of the MEL strategy are to:

1. Provide progress tracking of AgriFoSe2030 projects to support strategic decision-making at the challenge and programme-level, and to inform the annual and mid-point planning and reporting cycles.
2. Contribute with a standardised follow-up and recording process of the programme’s way of working with ToC at all levels.
3. Demonstrate the contribution of the programme toward desired outcomes as formulated in the ToC documents at the project, challenge, and programme levels, in terms of smaller scale or local outcomes, larger scale or regional/global outcomes, and ultimately, in promoting impact.
4. To stimulate, encourage, and facilitate ongoing learning and reflection at the project, challenge, and programme levels.
5. To demonstrate how the programme contributes to bridging science, policy, and practice.
6. Document and showcase learning and change stories, in terms of both successes and learning.

4. Design of the Theory of Change-based monitoring, evaluation and learning approach

The programme has adopted a ToC approach as a way of operating and to reach impact via its outputs-outcome-impact pathway (see diagram in Figure 1). Based on the principles set out in Annex 2, the AgriFoSe2030 MEL approach is based on tracking emerging change and assessing this against ToCs at the project, challenge, and programme levels.

The MEL strategy has been designed as a ‘progress and outcomes’ framework that follows the ‘spheres of influence’ in the ToC. Activities and outputs within the sphere of control will be largely monitored through an indicator-based approach. However, tracking change through the spheres of influence and interest is more complex and requires a more qualitative and exploratory approach. This involves collecting and analysing data on emerging changes and outcomes using the ToC. It enables evidence to be gathered along the ToC process in order to learn about AgriFoSe2030’s pathways to impact.

A set of simple indicators and a suite of light-touch standardised MEL tools and processes (further described further below and in appendix 3) will be used to document and track how project activities, outputs, and outcomes are progressing towards change and ultimately impact.

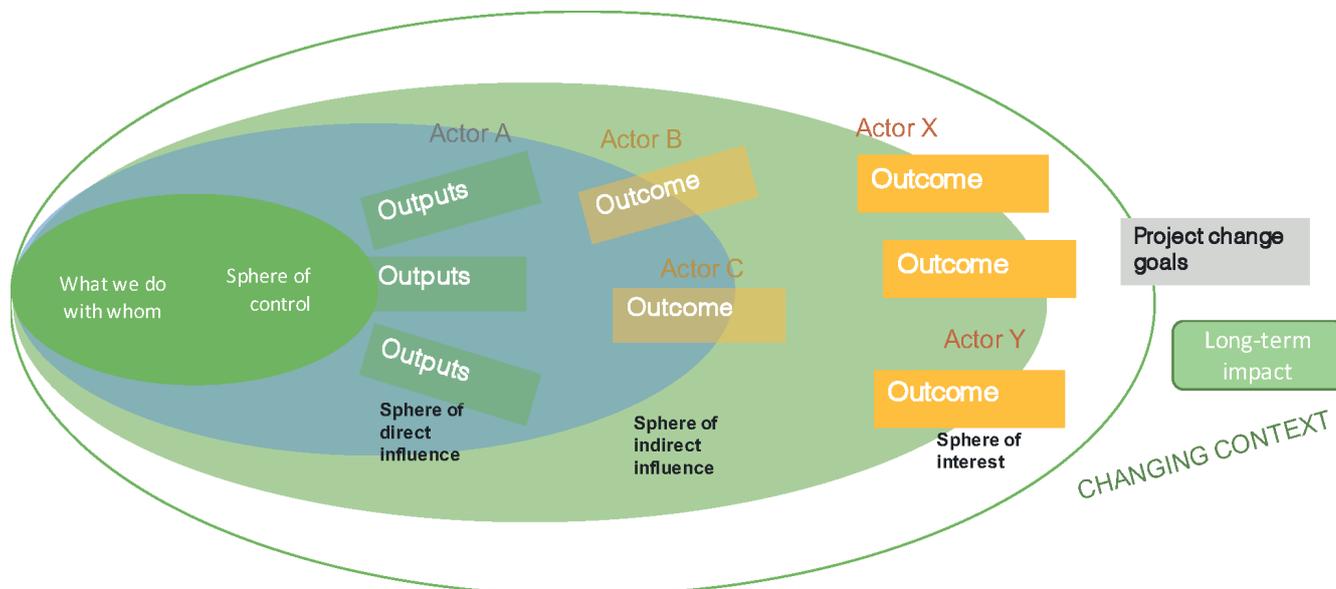


Figure 1. The ToC project approach/impact pathway. (Adapted from original diagram by Isabel Vogel)

Monitoring, evaluation and learning usually has two main purposes. As mentioned in section 3, one is to provide accountability to funders that projects have been performing as expected, the other is to generate evidence to support learning to improve projects and programmes as they are being implemented. In AgriFoSe2030, as in most research for development, the pathways to impact are complex and uncertain, so while accountability is important, the learning aspect is clearly emphasised in the AgriFoSe2030 MEL strategy. At the project, challenge and programme levels, the strategy emphasises learning for project teams for them to reflect on their own progress and adapt their strategies. See Annex 1 on implementing the MEL-strategy for more information on the learning approach.

The coming sections will unpack each element of the MEL strategy, and describe how the strategy will be applied.

5. Key elements of the MEL strategy

5.1 AgriFoSe2030 programme level ToC

Following the structure of the ToC, the AgriFoSe2030 MEL strategy aims to document emerging results at four levels: immediate activities and outputs, short-term outcomes, medium-term outcomes, and impacts (as set out in figure 2). Definitions of these levels of change within the ToC at an overarching programme level, are found in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Change levels and their definitions.

Category of Change	Definition	Example
Sphere of control – activities and outputs (what we do with whom)	Knowledge advancement, capacity development activity, or engagement activity identified and synthesised by AgriFoSe2030 researchers.	Research partners have developed the convening and facilitation skills and networks to identify and engage stakeholders.
Sphere of direct influence – short-term outcomes	A change in knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviours and/or relationships, contributed to by outputs and related activities.	Stakeholders understand the issues of smallholder farmers, from multiple perspectives.
Sphere of indirect influence – medium-term outcomes	A change in capacities, structures, systems, and practices.	Smallholder farmers have developed their capacities to improve practices, increase production. They have better access to markets and increased resources have been mobilised such as extension services, policy support, inputs, farmer cooperation, finance etc..
Long-term Impact	A durable change in the condition of people and their environment brought about by a chain of events or change in how a system functions. To these, research, innovations, and related activities are likely to have contributed through their outcome effects.	Smallholder farmers are able to continue improving farm productivity in a sustainable way, by demanding and engaging in science-based innovation and synergies with the entire supply chain as well as securing ecosystem functions.

5.2 Planning, adaptive management and reporting cycle

MEL is carried out at three levels, whereas two of the levels are merged into one:

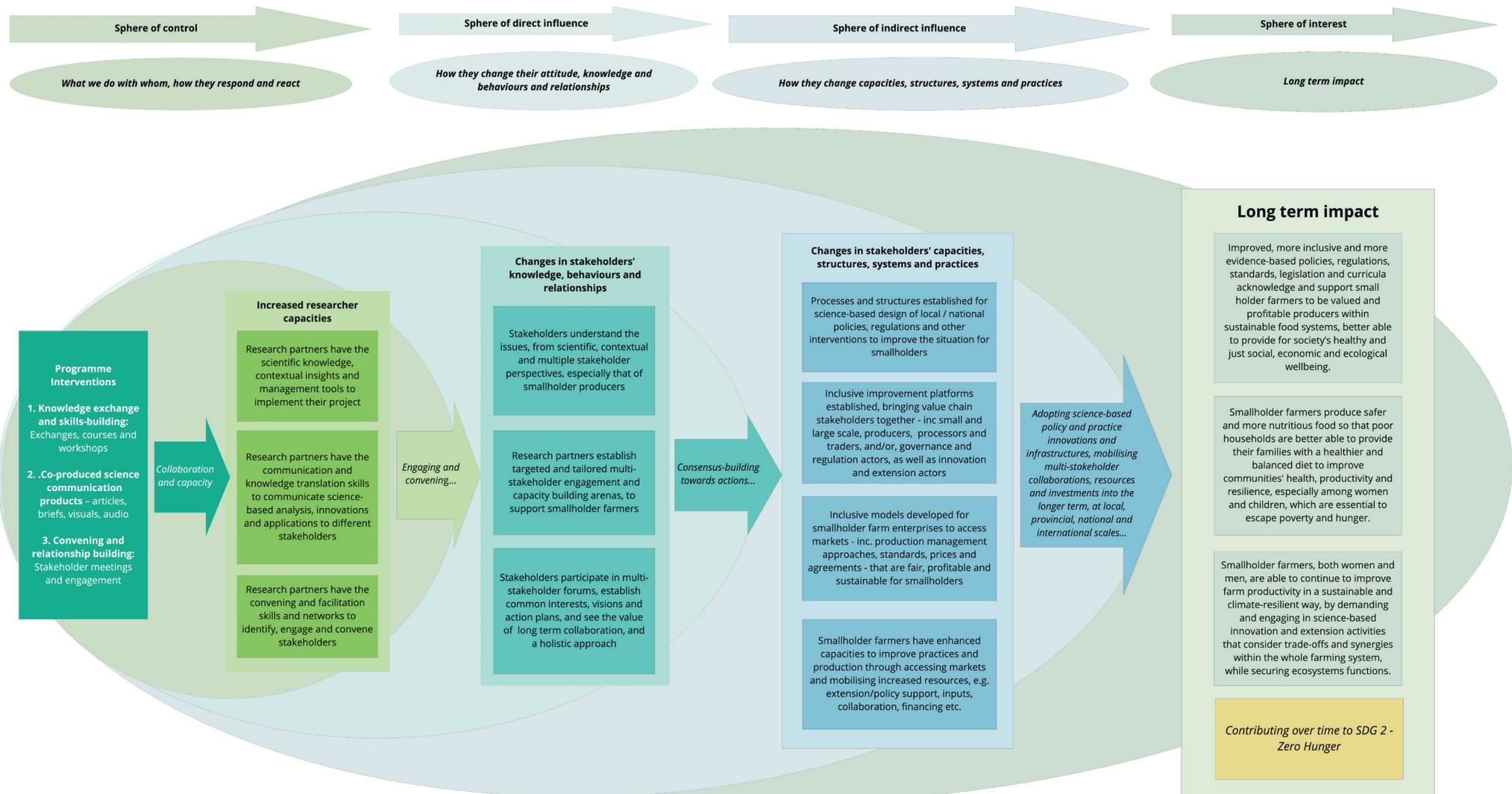
1. The project level – The MEL process at the project level involves collecting data to support project development along its ToC output-outcome-impact pathway.
2. The programme/challenge level – This entails a MEL process that captures the ToC progress at challenge level. It is mapped across the programme ToC and measured against the overall main objectives of the programme.

There is an annual work planning process in AgriFoSe2030 that sets out activities, planned project objectives and outputs for the upcoming year. This is carried out for the programme as a whole, whereby challenge leaders, programme management and the C&E team provide an initial plan of their key activities for the upcoming year. Amongst challenge leaders and C&E team this may include project specific activities. The development of the programme workplan starts a cycle of follow-up and adaptive management at the challenge and project levels. The workplan is ultimately followed-up 6 months later in the following year and the results reported to the project funder, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) in an annual results matrix. Thus, the programme workplan provides the foundation for the programme’s annual report to Sida.

We will follow-up the ToC progress annually for the programme, challenge and projects. This review is integrated in the MEL strategy and will be reported for at each level. The revision includes a **mid-point review and a review point at the end of an annual cycle – the annual review**. The data collection for MEL at each level is further described below.

Figure 2. The Theory of Change (TOC), AgriFoSe2030 programme level

AgriFoSe 2030 Phase II Programme ToC



MEL at the project level

MEL at the project level is set up as an annual cycle with a **mid-point review six months after project start and an annual review after 12 months**. These reviews are held with the same time intervals until the end of the project term. Projects are expected to provide reporting from a minimum of **four MEL activities annually**, using tools such as for example key-meeting trackers, after action reviews and change stories. These tools are described in Table 3 and Annex 4. The mid-point review will consist of a discussion session and does not require any written input from project teams. **For the annual review, a progress report will be required** to be sent in prior to the annual review meeting, which will need to include a summary of the four MEL activities carried out during the year.

The mid-point review meetings and annual meetings will include the project teams, challenge leaders, and the C&E team. The challenge leaders will, together with the C&E team, support projects with their ToC and MEL activities.

MEL at the challenge/programme level

At the programme/challenge level, MEL has been designed with regard to the format of the reporting cycle of Sida. **The annual review will occur prior to the annual reporting to Sida** to enable a feedback structure for that reporting. **The data collected at the project level and the challenge ToC progress, building on the projects' aggregated progress, is discussed at the programme level and in regard of the programme TOC.**

There will be **two meetings to follow up and discuss the TOC progress also at challenge/programme level**. The mid-point review will not require any written documentation but will consist of a meeting where the ToC progress is discussed. At the **annual review, a progress report for each challenge will be required** to be sent in prior to the annual review meeting. This report will include a review of outcomes measured against a set of MEL indicators.

At the challenge/programme level, meetings will involve programme management, challenge leaders and the C&E team.

The C&E team is appointed by the programme management to be responsible for the data collection and analysis of the ToC and MEL at the programme level, with participation from challenge leaders and programme management.

Likewise, the challenge leaders are responsible for the data collection and analysis of the ToC and MEL at the challenge level, with participation from the C&E team and programme management.

5.3 Monitoring framework for MEL

The **monitoring part of the MEL approach** will in summary use the following tools in order to meet the 'principles of utility and proportionality' set out in Annex 2:

- **a minimal set of high-level framing indicators**
- **narrative outcome tracking (qualitative and quantitative)** in 'real-time' at the project level, using simple templates and processes (described in Annex 4 and 5).

Within this monitoring part, there is flexibility for projects to collect their own data using methods such as surveys or baseline studies, as well as using the programme monitoring templates that are described in Annex 4.

AgriFoSe2030 MEL tools and the project's ToC

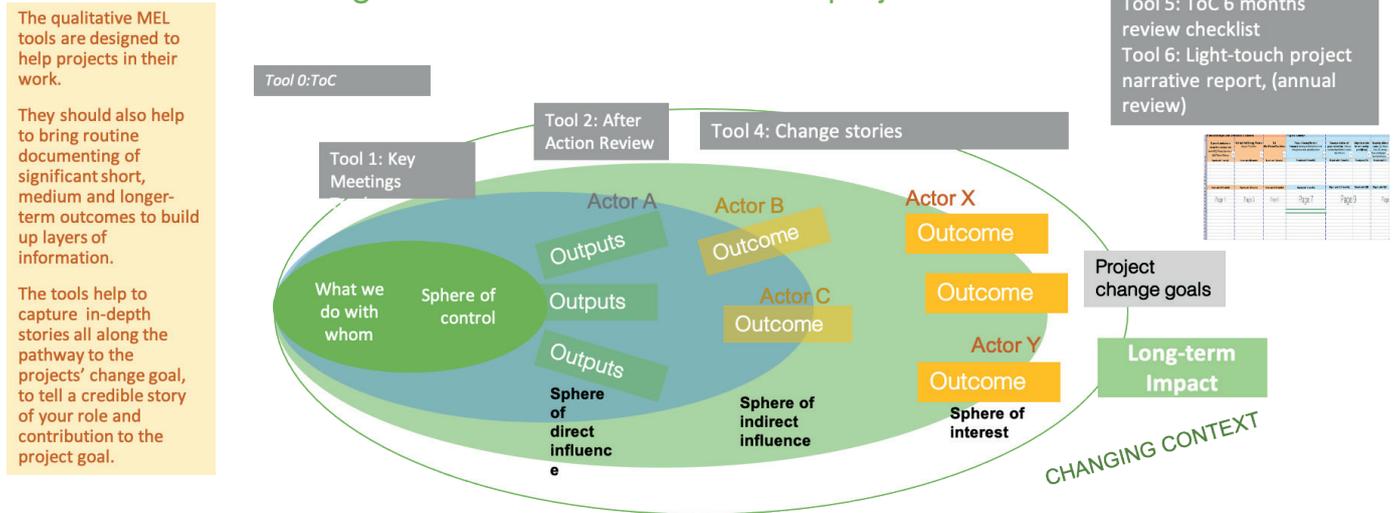


Figure 3. MEL tools, indicators, and the ToC

Figure 3 provides an overview of the types of indicators and the narrative tools that can be used, which we will explain further below.

5.3.1 High-level framing indicators

The programme-level ToC offers a framework for identifying a number of high-level framing indicators that help to summarise progress at the different stages of the programme period. Indicators are always limited and only provide a simple snapshot of development within the programme. They are therefore accompanied by more in-depth narrative reports from across the programme. There are several issues to consider and common pitfalls to avoid, when identifying indicators. Annex 3 sets out a discussion of the considerations and common pitfalls when developing indicators.

The given indicators are 'framing' indicators because they are broad and not specific enough to be collected directly. However, projects can regularly contribute with relevant information from their work so that information can be summarised continuously.

Indicator development requires careful thought and discussion with challenge leaders, the programme management team, and the C&E team, in order to arrive at a set of meaningful and efficient indicators that are feasible to collect with the resources available for MEL. Each selected indicator has to be documented with definitions and a data collection approach.

Table 2 provides an example set of indicators as a starting point.

Table 2. AgriFoSe2030 ToC framing indicators

Programme ToC framing indicator	Programme level activity	Challenge level activity	Project level activity, frequency
1. ToC level – Interventions / project delivery			
Expected number of projects meeting their planned milestones on time, and to budget, <i>as agreed annually through adaptive management.</i>	Management team supported by the C&E team, review challenge delivery every 6 months. Feeds into Sida reporting.	Challenge leaders provide/share information on project delivery in their portfolio after every 6 months.	Project leaders reports on project delivery every 6 months (<i>review indicator at mid-point and at annual meeting</i>). Challenge leaders coordinate, C&E provides support if necessary.
2. ToC level – Increased researcher capacities and skills building			
Number and % of research partners report ‘high’ or ‘very high’ levels of confidence in applying ToC; and increased competence in convening and engagement activities after receiving C&E support.	Management team supported by the C&E team analyse feedback of project teams’ responses to the ToC process and training events.	CLs provide qualitative feedback on the ToC process, training events and projects’ engagement skills.	Project leaders reports on project delivery every 6 months (<i>review indicator at mid-point and at annual meeting</i>).
3. ToC level – Changes in capacities, structures and systems			
Total numbers of contributions by the projects to changes in the conceptualisation, design, review or implementation of policies, strategies, laws, regulations, budgets, investments, training curricula, or other institutional processes.	Management team supported by the C&E team: Collation of numbers and examples of contributions from projects, captured through the change stories process.	CLs, with support from the C&E team, compile and categorise of projects’ change stories.	Collected from year 2, and then annually (number and descriptions of support, collected through change stories, with supporting evidence, e.g. governance documents, meeting minutes, media announcements, stakeholder testimonials).

5.3.2 AgriFoSe2030 MEL tools – Narrative outcome tracking

One of the challenges with a MEL strategy and process for a research and engagement programme is that research influence and advocacy consists of many meetings with key stakeholders – including smallholder farmers, traders’ associations, local leaders, local government officials, policymakers, senior policy advisers, and many others – who we seek to persuade to take action in support of our overall goal.

Sometimes, this means working directly through dialogue with key stakeholders. Therefore, much of the influencing activity of the project remains ‘invisible’. Although research teams and partners may frequently take action and adjust tactics in response to meetings, this is rarely documented, so what happens in significant meetings remains tacit.

A further difficulty in understanding the impact of meetings, is that the significance or consequences of decisions made during a meeting may not be obvious at the time and may only become evident later on. Therefore, it is important to track significant or ‘high stakes’ meetings in order to potentially be able to comprehensively backtrack the activities leading to an outcome, in which meeting events and decisions could have played a role.

All the AgriFoSe2030 monitoring tools have been designed to be used as part of a group reflection process. More so, we have included a simple template for recording the results for each tool, in which we encourage a ‘so what?’ and ‘now what?’ rapid reflection and capture. Over time, if these tools are used by project teams regularly and systematically, they will build up a ‘real time’ evidence base that helps to make visible the projects’ progress and change process along their ToC.

The tools can be complemented or combined with any project specific data gathering method such as surveys and baseline studies.

Guidance is provided for the tools, and support will be provided for the first round of documentation and reporting when using them. The AgriFoSe2030 MEL tools are briefly described in Table 3. For a more detailed guidance and templates for each tool, see Annex 4.

There are furthermore two other tools that will be used – the project annual report template and the 6 months ToC review checklist (see Annex 5 and 6).

Table 3. AgriFoSe2030 MEL tools

MEL tool	Description
Key Stakeholder Meetings Tracker	This tool aims to help you to gather systematic information about key meetings with significant stakeholders, and record the intentions going into the meeting, and what was gained as a result of it.
After Action Review (AAR)	<p>An After Action Review (AAR) is a structured group review of a major activity or event, e.g. a stakeholder workshop:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It enables the individuals involved to analyse what they did, what happened as a result, examine why it happened, what went well, what needs improvement and what lessons can be learned from the experience, to further improve future practice. 2. Such reviews also support institutional memory by capturing and documenting what happened at a particular moment in time and the organisations’ analysis of it. 3. A series of After Action Review reports can also be used as a data source for future evaluations and related activities, for example, to populate a timeline of critical events during an advocacy campaign or to inform change stories. <p>AAR is a useful reflective practice for project teams to adopt as a routine, as it supports an adaptive management approach in an evolving change process.</p>
Change stories	<p>The change story process is designed to capture incremental change, in real time. This includes ‘small but mighty’ intermediate outcomes that are significant, even if the big outcome of a policy change, or a commitment has not been achieved yet. The tool therefore captures important signs of progress that have occurred through stakeholder engagement, in a systematic, analytical way.</p> <p>Change stories can be developed by drawing together various sources of information, as appropriate, e.g., individual observation; After Action Reviews; face-to-face interviews or workshops; findings from surveys; and Key Meetings Trackers. The template encourages transparency about the underlying information and data sources and the extent to which change stories could be verified by an external MEL reviewer.</p> <p>How to use: A change story is a more in-depth reflection, requires more structured input from the team, and from stakeholders. Suggested frequency: every 6 months or annually. At least 1 per year should be provided as supporting evidence for project reports.</p>

Annexes

Annex 1. Implementing AgriFoSe2030's MEL strategy: Programme, projects, and challenges

Monitoring, evaluation, and learning should, when possible, be integrated with programme/project planning and be carried out continuously throughout the programme and project period. The MEL approach should build on and adapt according to insights from previous MEL activities. The AgriFoSe2030 reports once a year to Sida. This sets the pace for the workplan for AgriFoSe2030 and the annual reporting, thus for the MEL reporting. It is the starting point for the AgriFoSe2030 MEL implementation plan. The subsequent sections set out MEL activities and implementation at different levels (programme, challenge and project level), specifying the purpose and approach at each level, and roles and responsibilities for that MEL activity.

Annual reporting to Sida – Workplan and follow-up on activities for projects, challenges and programme

There are two reporting activities at this level: the annual results matrix and an annual narrative report.

Purpose: Annual reporting to Sida – Part 1, matrix.

Level: Programme.

MEL tool to be used: Annual results matrix.

Who is responsible: The programme manager is ultimately responsible for submitting the matrix to Sida. The reporting and compilation of the matrix is, however, a joint effort between challenge leaders, the programme management team, and the C&E team. The management team will lead this process.

Who contributes: Project team leaders.

Period and frequency: Reporting is carried out annually.

The reporting to Sida uses a standard template (table 4) which challenge leaders, project teams, the programme management team, and C&E team will use to summarise the main activities for their projects/challenges and the programme as a whole for the coming year.

Purpose: Annual reporting to Sida – Part 2, narrative report

Level: Programme

Task/approach and process to be used: Narrative report template

Who is responsible: The reporting is a joint effort between challenge leaders, programme management and the C&E team to compile the narrative report.

Who contributes: Project team leaders.

Period and frequency: Annually

Table 4. Annual results matrix for challenges, projects and programme wide activities.

2020	Sub-projects	Planned project outputs/ deliverables (a)	Year of output deliverable	For annual follow up: outputs according to plan* (No.)	Description of intended outcomes (b)	Year of intended outcome	For annual follow up: outcomes according to plan*	Means of verification for the outputs	Means of verification for the outcomes	Project end year	Expected impact	Narrative observations on plans and progress
	Challenge level											
1. Improving access to safe and nutritious food	project 1											
	project 2											
	project 3											
	Challenge level											
2. Agricultural productivity and ecosystem functions	project 1							-	-			
	project 2							-	-			
	project 3							-	-		-	
	Challenge Level											
3. Science-based innovation and extension	project 1											
	project 2											
	project 3											
	Challenge Level											
4. Smallholder agriculture within transforming food systems	project 1											
	project 2											
	project 3											
5. Programme wide												

(a) likely several per project

(b) likely one per project

* = Dark green completed; brown delayed; light green cancelled

A narrative annual report will also be produced, to provide context and qualitative information to accompany the annual results matrix.

The narrative report will summarise the main highlights from the MEL reporting and ToC processes (indicator and qualitative data capture) from projects and challenges (see coming sections).

Monitoring and reporting for projects and challenges

Purpose: Project MEL reporting.

Level: Project.

Approach and process to be used: Annual report template and AgriFoSe2030 MEL Tools (see annex 4 and 5 for guidance and templates).

Who is responsible: Project team leader. An annual project report is produced by the project team leader, which includes a review of the ToC, using the Annual Project Report Template (see Annex 5).

Annual reports are supported by the AgriFoSe2030 MEL tools used by project teams and the reports should include information from a minimum of four MEL activities per year, including at least one change story.

An update is required every 6 months where progress is discussed and reviewed in a meeting with challenge leaders and the C&E team. This does not require any written input or reporting from the project team.

Who contributes: Challenge leaders discuss and review the draft annual report with the project team. Project teams adjust it in accordance with input and sends a final version to challenge leaders and the C&E team prior to the annual review meeting point.

Period and frequency: Annual main report, check in every 6 months.

As described in Annexes 4 and 5, the AgriFoSe2030 MEL tools have been designed to be a group reflection process. All tools also have a simple template for recording results. This will encourage a 'so what?' and 'now what?' rapid reflection and capture of progress made in the project. Over time, if these tools are used by project teams regularly and systematically, they will build up a 'real time' evidence base that help make visible the projects' progress along their ToC.

Project teams will be expected to use the tools to track and reflect over their own work. These tools can be complemented or combined with any project-specific data gathering method such as surveys and baseline studies.

Detailed guidance is provided for the MEL reporting. See Annex 4 for guidance and templates for each tool, and Annex 5 for the annual report template as well as Annex 6 for the 6 months review checklist. There will be training and support provided to familiarise project teams with each of the tools and how they should be used.

Learning in AgriFoSe2030

Learning is crucial in a complex programme like AgriFoSe2030, where there is a high level of uncertainty over whether outcomes will emerge as proposed by the ToC. Outcomes depend on engagement with stakeholders over which project teams have little control. An activity may lead to unexpected results, or the context for the project may itself change, creating new setbacks or opportunities. Therefore, ongoing learning as the project is being implemented is key to enable project teams to adapt their plans and respond as circumstances change, while keeping their desired outcomes in view.

Learning for project adaptation is a key benefit of working with ToC, and so it is a key part of the AgriFoSe2030 monitoring and evaluation strategy. Light-touch, structured and timely learning helps project team leaders and challenge leaders maintain flexibility in their decisions, knowing that uncertainties exist and that there is a need to adjust plans to improve progress towards desired outcomes. Using the ToC in combination with monitoring information to guide learning in the project and inform the next year's planning is therefore a key part of both project and challenge management in the programme.

Figure 4 provides an overview of the learning processes that are embedded into the project management and reporting. At the mid-point review, challenge leaders facilitate a review of the project progress, using the ToC as a guide. A ToC review checklist is provided to guide the conversation and capture lessons (see annex 6).

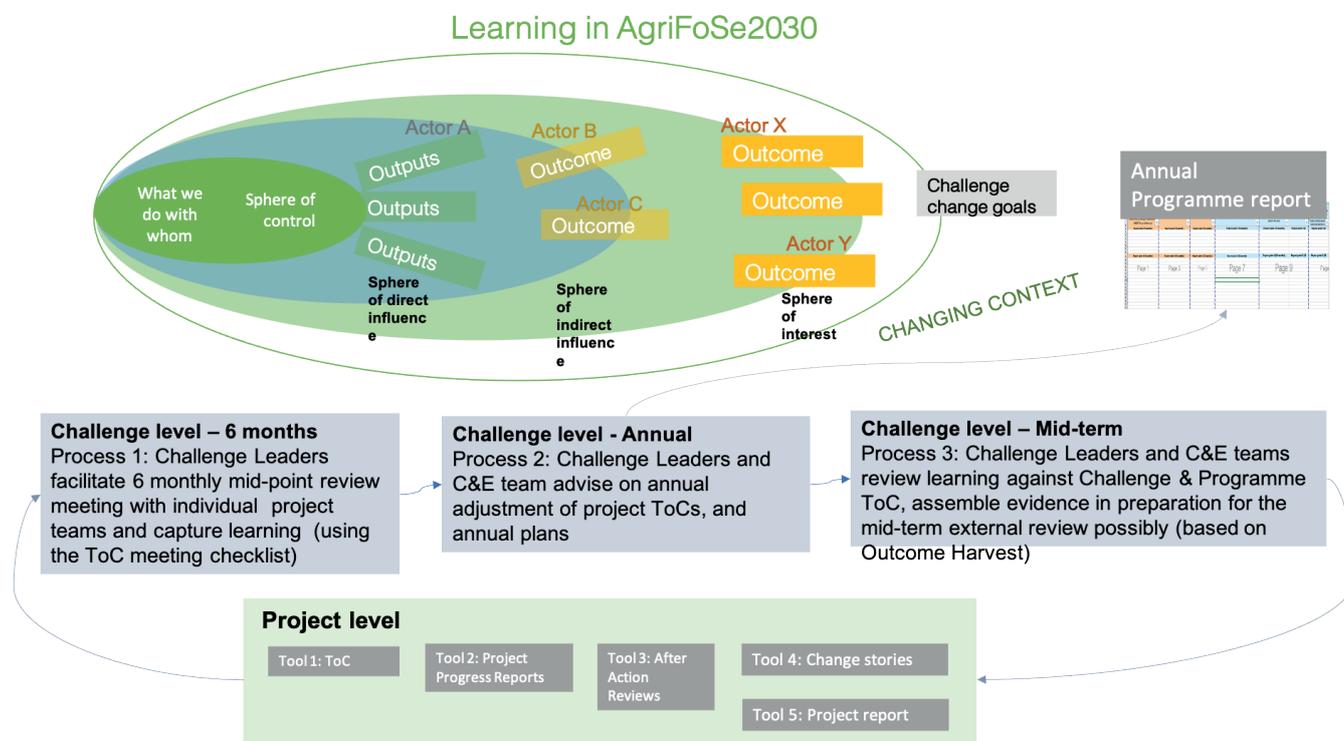


Figure 4: ToC-based learning cycle in AgriFoSe2030

Learning process 1, 1-6 months: At the mid-point review, challenge leaders and project teams review progress along the ToC, check in on assumptions, and capture learning. The meeting uses the ToC checklist provided in Annex 6.

Learning process 2, 1-12 months: At the annual review, project teams, challenge leaders and the C&E team review progress based on the annual reports submitted by the project teams, and agree on the annual adjustment of the ToC. This ultimately feeds into the project plans and the ToCs for the coming year.

Learning process 3: There is an option for an internal mid-term review of learning, led by the challenge leaders and C&E team, to review learning against the challenge ToCs and the Programme ToC. This could be to prepare and assemble the evidence base for the external evaluation at mid-term. This process could be usefully structured according to the Outcome Harvesting approach (<https://outcomeharvesting.net/home/>) which provides a tested methodology for gathering and assessing evidence and learning along ToCs.

Purpose: Generating and capturing learning along the ToC

Level: Programme and Challenge

MEL tool to be used: ToC reflection checklist

Who is responsible: The Challenge Leaders lead the conversation, project team leaders respond and critically reflect on their ToC and projects.

Who contributes: Project Team leaders.

Period and frequency: 6 monthly check-in, which includes a project review and ToC reflection

Annex 2. Principles and theory for the AgriFoSe2030 ToC-based MEL approach

ToC-based MEL approach

ToC is a systematic approach focusing on pathways to change. This approach is increasingly becoming popular as an applied method toward development planning and MEL. The approach aims to promote critical thinking and learning, and to unpack and challenge assumptions about how change happens. The ToC can be, “a systematic way of clarifying the underlying theories and cause-effect pathways that underpin initiatives working to promote social and economic change, particularly in complex interventions” (Rajala et al., 2021). This would include interventions as those taking place in agricultural research for development.

The AgriFoSe2030 programme has integrated ToC as a way of working at each of its levels- project, challenge and programme, where there are a series of related ToCs. In establishing this approach, the AgriFoSe2030 team has utilised an adapted version of the ToC stepwise-method (for producing ToC approach) and existing guidelines toward using ToCs for research (IDRC, 2017; van Es et al., 2015). Guided by the ToCs at programme, challenge and project level, MEL in the second phase of the AgriFoSe2030 programme will be implemented at these three main levels- illustrated in Figure 1: 1) programme; 2) challenge; 3) project level.

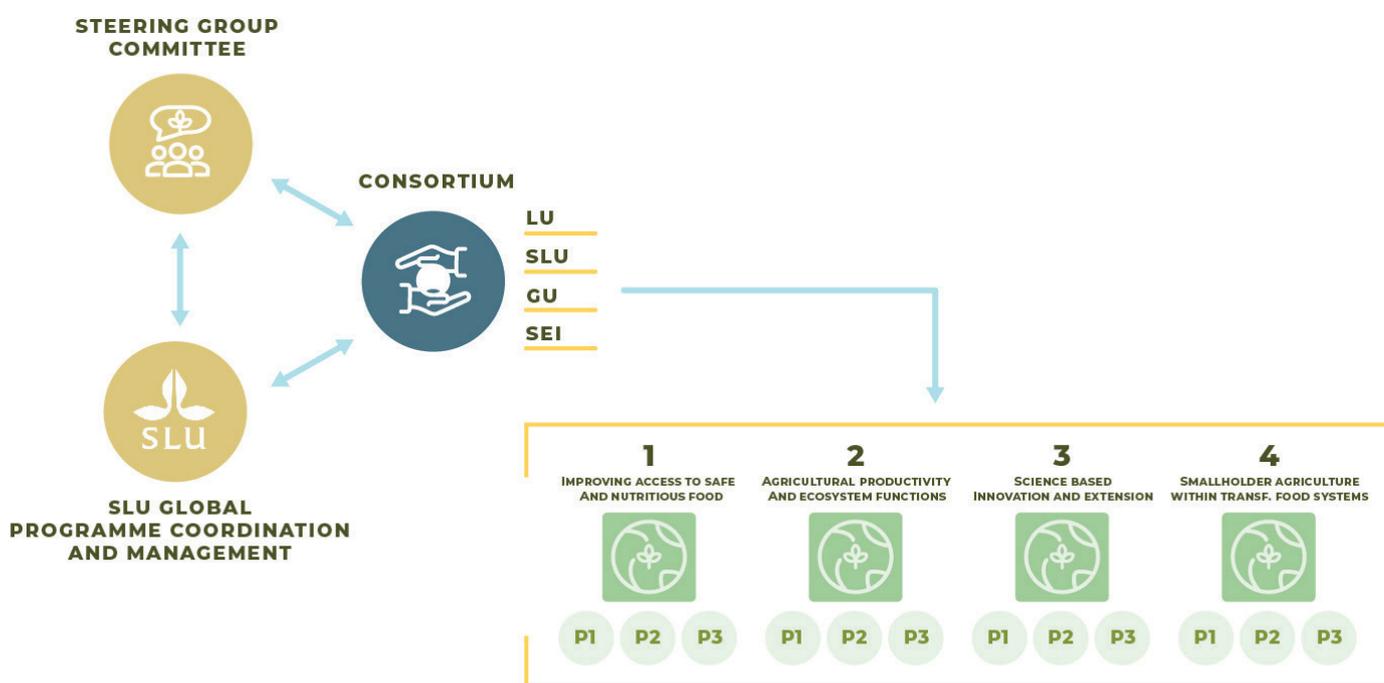


Figure 5. The organisation of AgriFoSe2030 programme phase 2. Numbers 1-4 indicate the four challenges and p1-p3 under each challenge represent the projects that fall under a given challenge.

Key principles informing the MEL strategy

The following principles frame our approach to MEL:

- **Accountability and learning:** The MEL strategy has to respond to the dual objectives of accountability and learning. It needs to fulfil an accountability purpose for funders by making the programme efforts more transparent, and support more effective projects. It also needs to facilitate learning about how and why the programme is influencing change to inform project adaptations and inform future designs.
- **Scope - acknowledging uncertainty and unpredictability of research-driven change:** Research for development is an inherently unpredictable process, requiring exploration and intensive stakeholder engagement in diverse countries' policy and practice systems, with high uncertainty over outcomes. Projects cannot 'achieve' outcomes that rely on the actions of other stakeholders, and it is unfair to penalise a lack of progress in areas where the project is dependent on the contributions of stakeholders such as local government (as long as the project has done its part of course).
- **ToC-based analysis of contribution to outcomes:** Given that most of the change supported by AgriFoSe2030 is highly qualitative and emerges from a combination of factors, the outcome-level approach is informed by a Contribution Analysis (CA) logic. CA is a ToC-based evaluation approach where diversity in implementation approaches and contexts does not provide the conditions for an experimental design (Mayne 2012; 2011; 2008). CA suggests that if the ToC can be verified with empirical evidence, external influencing factors have been accounted for, and alternative explanations disproved, then it is reasonable to conclude that the intervention has made a contribution to the outcomes in question (Mayne, 2012). Given limited resources, a wholesale implementation of CA may not be possible at the programme or challenge level; however, the CA logic can be infused into the MEL tools and processes, e.g. ensuring that data is collected on contexts, outcomes and project contributions, and that analysis considers alternative explanations. It can inform an iterative evolution of the ToC as part of an annual structured organisational learning process.
- **Capturing information and data in 'real time':** Change is incremental and is often intangible. The AgriFoSe2030 MEL approach is designed to capture incremental change, in real time – 'small but mighty' outputs and outcomes that are important, even if the big headline outcome of a policy change, or a commitment has not been achieved yet. Thus, the MEL approach aims to capture important signs of progress that have come about through stakeholder engagement towards policy influencing goals, as they happen, qualitatively, but in a systematic, analytical way.

If outcomes are documented systematically and analytically, with details of the context and contributions, this builds up over time to a credible and substantial internal evidence base that can be used for MEL to improve strategies.

¹Mayne, J. (2012). Contribution analysis: Coming of age? *Evaluation*, 18(3), 270–280.

Mayne, J. (2011). Addressing Cause and Effect in Simple and Complex Settings through Contribution analysis. In R. Schwartz, K. Forss, & M. Marra (Eds.), *Evaluating the Complex*. Transaction Publishers.

Mayne, J. (2008). Contribution analysis: An approach to exploring cause and effect. *International Learning and Change (ILAC) Brief*, 16.

²CA is based on having a clearly articulated ToC, which is examined and tested via a systematic 'logic of enquiry' that uses evidence to investigate: observed results; various assumptions that underpin the theory of change; other influencing factors, positive and negative; alternative explanations for the outcome.

It is also possible for projects to capture a degree of change using baseline and end-line surveys. However, although these types of methods indicate that a change has likely taken place, they do not, by themselves, provide an analysis of how and why these changes have come about, nor the role of the project. Therefore, surveys can be complemented very well by the 'real time' qualitative tools, that have been designed to capture the projects' contributions as they are made, in order to build up the causal story over time. The tools incorporate a reflection of other factors and drivers that could also be contributing to the change, alongside the projects own efforts. This helps to anchor the project contribution, and lend credibility to the overall evidence about how and why the project contributed to the changes observed. An external evaluator can then seek to verify the story captured in the qualitative 'real time' tools.

Because not all projects will have the resources to conduct surveys, we have opted to use the qualitative tools outlined in Annex 4 as the minimum request for projects to use.

- **Use-focused, proportionate and efficient:** Although the scope of the MEL strategy is more ambitious than in Phase 1, it still remains clearly focused on tracking information that will be used in management and decision making, ensuring that this is proportionate in terms of resources and demands on staff. Outcome information will be used for reporting, and to inform learning to optimise current and future projects, which can be shared with the wider public as well as internally. Over time, the MEL process should contribute to strengthening the learning culture within AgriFoSe2030 and enhancing effectiveness across projects and the whole portfolio of AgriFoSe2030's work.
- **Credible self-assessment with integrity:** The AgriFoSe2030 MEL approach is a self-assessment approach, not an independent evaluation, so the expected levels of rigour and quality of data will reflect this, and the MEL resources available. The programme will gather information on progress that will be primarily qualitative, using a suite of standardised MEL tools and processes to promote a consistent and systematic approach. Quantitative data will also be gathered if appropriate, and if opportunity and resources allow.

MEL data and information will be analysed at key points in the programme cycle with integrity and transparency. These values will be realised by encouraging the reporting of setbacks and challenges as well as successes, and by encouraging a practice of critical reflection to drive adaptations and improvements in projects and other levels in the programme. As the MEL approach is being introduced in the first year, we expect that the use of the MEL tools will improve over time, with a resulting improvement in the quality and consistency of the information produced.

Annex 3. Considerations and pitfalls when developing indicators

The programme level ToC offers a framework for identifying some high-level framing indicators that provide the anchor points for summarising progress at the different levels of the programme. However, there are a number of issues to consider, and common pitfalls to avoid, when identifying indicators. Most importantly, is how indicators at different levels will relate to each other, in order to keep the indicator framework meaningful and manageable. Simister (2016)³ discusses the options, pros and cons, when designing an appropriate system of indicators in a programme.

Other key issues to consider include the extent to which projects can collect the same indicator in exactly the same way in different contexts for this to be aggregated in a numerical way at the programme level. This poses challenges, for example, a programme level indicator such as ‘number of local government policies influenced by projects’ becomes meaningless if ‘local government policies’ are interpreted in a different way in different countries and settings.

An alternative is to use a set of programme level indicators as ‘framing indicators’ – that is, they are broad and not specific enough to be collected directly, but more specific project level indicators can be mapped to them to bring together and summarise related information from across the programme. Table 5 sets out an example.

Table 5. Example of AgriFoSe2030 framing indicator

Framing indicator	Project level
Projects influence government policies and practices at a local and national level	Number of times government officials invite project teams to attend meetings to discuss policy
	Evidence of project submissions being copied into government policy documents
	Evidence that projects were successful in influencing government officials and stakeholders
	Inclusion of project material in training curricula and other materials

This second approach seems more appropriate for AgriFoSe2030, given the diversity of contexts in which the projects are operating. Further, Simister (2016) advises that only a limited set of indicators is identified because the indicator framework can rapidly become unmanageable. Resources and morale are quickly exhausted at this volume of reporting!

However, it should be possible to identify a limited set of indicators that are anchored in the early part of the ToC. These should allow flexibility for challenges and projects to identify their context-specific indicators to help track progress and learn from it. Sometimes indicator development identifies a MEL tool or a process that may need to be implemented to enable the indicator, e.g. a survey if the best indicator is a survey response, e.g. ‘number and % of smallholder farmers that are ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with the support provided by the project.’

Indicator development requires careful thought and discussion with challenge leaders to arrive at a set of meaningful and efficient indicators that are feasible to collect with the resources available for MEL. Each agreed indicator then has to be documented with definitions and a data collection approach.

³ Simister, N. 2016: ‘Summarising portfolio change: results frameworks at organisational level’, INTRACT January 2016 <https://www.intrac.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Summarising-portfolio-change-results-frameworks-at-organisational-level.pdf>

Annex 4: AgriFoSe2030 MEL Tools

See separate file

Annex 5: Template for projects' annual report

The annual report should include the four MEL activities that have been undertaken during the last 12 months.

Project Details

Countries / project	
Start date	
Completion date	
Type of reporting submitting here	Annual report or half-year update
Submitted by	
Email	

Summary of project objectives for the period

Project objectives	
Objectives for the period	
ToC areas this relates to	

A. AgriFoSe2030 indicators – for annual report

Programme ToC framing indicators	Select which indicator that is being reported in this period, and provide a summary, and links to supporting documentation
ToC level - Interventions	
Project delivery: Expected number of projects meeting their planned milestones on time, and to budget, <i>as agreed annually through adaptive management</i>	
ToC level - Increased researcher capacities	
Knowledge exchange and skills building: Number and % of research partners report 'high' or 'very high' levels of confidence in applying ToC; and increased competence in convening and engagement skills after receiving C&E support	
Communication products, reach: Number of clicks (partial or full read) of an article or story on the website	
ToC level – Changes in capacities, structures and systems (From Year 2)	
Total numbers of contributions to policy processes and practices by the programme – number of practices, policies, strategies, laws, regulations, budgets, investments, training curricula, modified in design or implementation, where the programme has made a contribution	

B. Project progress and challenges - for annual report

Please provide a summary for the period under the following headings (write 150–500 words per section):

1. What have been the principal progress and gains that support the projects objectives and ToC outcomes for the year? (summarising information from MEL activities). Please note if these were planned or unexpected.

2. What have been the main **setbacks** that have held back gains?

3. What have been the **enabling factors, and/or constraining factors** that have supported or hindered gains? E.g. parallel work by allies; coordinated efforts; a high-level policy decision that created a window of opportunity.

4. What is the **significance** of both gains and challenges, given the context? E.g. very difficult political context, so even small gains have been significant.

5. What **challenges and priorities remain** to be tackled to make progress towards the next project milestones?

6. Based on this reflection, how should project plans be **adapted**? What should be the **objectives and workplans** for the coming 6 months/year?

Overall role and contributions towards the project objectives and outcomes

Please describe your projects' overall contribution to progress referring to your ToC.
Please report on outcomes and significant events, activities, outputs and related outcomes you feel were most impactful, the gains and achievements in your project you are most proud of.

7. What major milestones has your project **contributed to**, given the context?

Lessons Learned

8. What have been the main lessons learned that you will take forward into next year's work programme?

Evidence sources

Please note and attach any documentation, data or other evidence that supports this report e.g.;

After Action reviews

Change stories

Additional Information (optional)

If you have any additional information you would like to share, you may provide it here.
e.g. pictures, products and tools

Annex 6: AgriFoSe2030 ToC 6 monthly review checklist – for the mid-point review meeting

This checklist is provided as a guide for challenge leaders and project teams when they conduct the half-year review meeting with project teams.

The checklist can be shared in advance with project teams, so that they can review their ToC, project progress and consider these questions in preparation for the call. In the call, CLs will go through these questions in order. This checklist complements the report format above.

Part 1: Review changes in relation to the ToC

1. What has actually changed since the project start?

- Describe changes in the context
- Describe what has changed for different target groups (especially different types of organisations and men/women)?
- Try to provide stories, examples and/or evidence to illustrate these points – we could develop these into change stories.
- Include negative changes or setbacks that have affected the project, e.g. climate or policy changes.

Examples of highlights and outcomes:

Examples of set-backs and challenges:

2. If you have noted changes for different groups, what have these been, and what are the implications of these for the project?

- This could be either to the target groups or in terms of programme plans - note: “expect the unexpected” : we are looking for positive, negative and unintended consequences here.

3. What do you consider to be the most significant changes and/or outcomes for the project’s goals?

- E.g. the engagement of a specific stakeholder that has been difficult to engage so far, but they open doors for the project. Or it can be a negative change.

Part 2: Thinking about the contributions made by the programme

1. What did the project contribute to these changes?

- This could include some or all of the following and others: money, capacity development, technical expertise, coordination etc. Try to reflect and see everything that the project may have contributed.

2. Who else or what else may have helped or hindered progress in relation to these noted changes?

3. In your opinion, what have been the project's most useful and effective ways of working in relation to making these changes happen? Why?

4. What are the main lessons you feel the team has learned about implementation in this period?

Part 3: Review of assumptions

1. Consider the main assumptions in your ToC for this period and these outcomes, to what extent did they hold true?

- Were there any that were proved wrong?
- What do you know now that you didn't then? Are there important insights that you now have from this implementation period?

2. Can these assumptions be updated in the light of experience?

- How would you update them?
- What about assumptions for the next phase of the project – do they need updating?

3. Overall, were there better/other ways in which the programme could have supported planned changes and/or responded to unplanned ones?

- Please explain what they might have been and why they might have worked better?

4. What would you do differently next time?

5. What does this critical reflection mean for adjusting the project strategy and plans?

- Do any changes need to be made to the plans or implementation approach? E.g. need to work with different groups; plan for different communications etc.

Summarise how your plans need to change based on this review.