

Towards a theory-based assessment of the Climate Smart Agriculture Strategy (EASAC) for the SICA Region

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In 2017, the Central American Agricultural Council (CAC), with the support of CCAFS, CIAT, IICA, FAO, ECLAC and CATIE, formulated and adopted the Climate Smart Agriculture Strategy (EASAC) for the Central American Integration System (SICA) region. This regional strategy aims at promoting climate-smart agriculture (CSA) at scale and is an original example of regional policy.

This communication presents the first results of an assessment process of the EASAC outcomes three years after its launch. We carried out a methodology mobilizing the theory-based assessment (Delahais and Toulemonde 2012; Lemire, et al. 2012, Maine, 2008) applied to a policy innovation, in this case, the EASAC. Theory-based approaches have been designed to provide systematic, robust approaches to understand whether the intended outcomes of an intervention have been achieved (or not), and the importance of the intervention's contribution under consideration, relative to that of other alternative causes. This assessment process encompasses three steps: (i) the formulation of the EASAC Theory of Change (ToC), (ii) the identification of changes aligned with the ToC and (iii) the analysis of EASAC's contribution to some of these identified changes. In this communication, we present the results of the two first above mentioned steps.

To establish the EASAC ToC, we first reformulated the EASAC into a ToC vocabulary/thinking starting from the policy document (CAC, 2017) and adjusting it through an iterative process of consultation and validation with 8 key actors (EASAC formulators). Once the ToC validated, we conducted 44 semi-directed interviews with actors involved in CSA related actions or interventions at regional and national level of the 8 countries of SICA. The objective of these interviews was to understand what expected changes identified in the EASAC ToC have occurred so far. Finally, the changes were analyzed and compared across and among countries.

The EASAC ToC is structured along four routes: (1) policy route, (2) institutional, (3) financing and (4) communication. The four routes aim through the formulation and implementation of CSA policies (policy route); the creation and promotion of spaces for CSA dialogue and partnerships and the strengthening of CSA capacities of actors (institutional route); the development of a portfolio of CSA projects to apply to competitive international funds (financial route); the implementation of communication campaigns to foster the implementation of the EASAC (communication route) to a final outcome: the adoption of CSA practices, services and technologies by local farmers and thus achieve a great impact focused on a more productive, adapted and resilient agriculture in the face of climate change (CC).

Results related to the identification of changes aligned with the ToC show that, although the EASAC was launched only 3 year ago, **252** changes related to the four EASAC ToC routes were identified in all countries of SICA and at the regional level to date, attesting of a great dynamic toward CSA scaling in the region. A total of **225** changes occurred in the eight countries in the SICA region. Costa Rica and Guatemala stand out with the highest number of changes identified. Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua show with an average progress, and finally Panamá, the Dominican Republic and Belize exhibit the lowest number of changes observed. The remaining **27** identified changes were exclusively at the regional level.

The policy route is the strongest and most profuse as it concentrates the largest number of changes identified (**182** changes) that mostly (**98**) correspond to the formulation and implementations of CSA conducive policies at regional, national and/or subnational levels concentrated in Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. The remaining changes (**84**) are local implemented CSA conducive projects that respond to regional programs (sometimes 'jumping' the national level) such as EUROCLIMA+, FAO-EU FLEGT - Latin America, REDD+, RECLIMA, RELIVE, BIOCLIMA, ARAUCLIMA, AGROINNOVA, PROCAGICA, among others. However, the CSA approach has yet to be incorporated further into the planning, research, monitoring and evaluation processes of the agricultural sector at both the regional and national levels.

The **institutional route**, although less developed than the policy route, presents a total of **45** changes distributed in three dimensions: i) the creation and promotion of coordination initiatives, alliances and CSA dialogue spaces at regional and national levels, ii) the strengthening of CSA capacities of governments, research actors and extension systems at national level and iii) financial services designed and implemented through specific programs, mainly supported by regional cooperation (ECLAC). Most of the changes in this route corresponds to CSA dialogue spaces and alliances mainly in Costa Rica, Guatemala and El Salvador. However, there is a gap between countries in the creation and diversification of coordination initiatives, alliances and spaces for dialogue for the promotion and follow-up of the CSA approach. Moreover, there is a lack of institutionalization of the programs for research actors, public officials and extensionists to strengthen their capacities to formulate and implement CSA practices, services and technologies.

The **financing route** has been strengthened mainly through technical and financial support from international cooperation agencies with **25** changes identified at the regional and national levels mostly impulse by a regional initiative from FAO in partnership with the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI) that seeks to facilitate access to climate finance and strengthen the national capacities of the countries to create a portfolio of CSA projects in the region. Even though there are advances in this route, some aspects pointed out in the EASAC are still missing or are partly implemented. A consolidated portfolio of CSA projects and an updated database on sources of climate financing need to be consolidated. Besides, more work must be done on the creation of alliances to promote financial services and, to consolidate a common agenda of CSA climate action in Central America. Finally, regarding the **communication route**, no changes were observed so far.

Considering the orientation of changes both at regional and country levels, the emphasis of the changes has been oriented more towards adaptation to CC (137) than mitigation (36), although the CSA approach integrate both adaptation and mitigation. The agricultural sectors most prioritized have been cattle raising (73), coffee (44), and some basic grains: corn (15), rice (14) and beans (13). In addition, the predominant issues on the sector's policy agenda in the countries have been water resource sustainability (45), food and nutritional security (FNS) and family agriculture (95). Finally, it is worth noting that the changes identified tends to be geographically concentrated in the Central American Dry Corridor, although the aim of the intervention is to expand the scope of these measures to other areas of the region.

The first results of the evaluation of the effect to date of the EASAC provides original insights to the discussion on the effectiveness of scaling up CSA through a regional policy framework, on the effectiveness of EASAC ToC and its implementation features. To go deeper into this, a rigorous and systematic analysis must be conducted in a second phase of this study to assess the degree of contribution of the EASAC to these identified changes. However, these first results of the assessment process is of interest to regional and national stakeholders in particular CAC executive secretariats well as scholars and practitioners as they enable to draw preliminary recommendations to support the implementation of EASAC in the region and lessons learned for strengthening enabling policy environments to achieve CSA goals in the region and other parts of the world.