

# Using theory to understand how policy change happens: Insights from agricultural research for development

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## Abstract

Influencing policy is an important scaling mechanism. However, if a program is to plausibly claim that it has or can influence policy, it needs to explain how. This is not straightforward because of the complex nature of policy change. Scholars suggest the use of theory to help answer the 'how' question. In this article, we show how, in practice, a middle-range policy change theory—Kingdon's Policy Window theory—helped us model the workings of four outcome trajectories that produced agricultural policy outcomes in four cases. By providing a common framework, the middle-range theory helped accumulate learning from one evaluation to the next, generating specific and generalizable insights in the process. Accumulation learning in this way can help organizations become more convincing in the proposals they write to donors, more accountable and better able to identify and deliver on their goals.

**Keywords:** biofortification; seed certification; middle-range theory; realist evaluation; theory of change

## 1. Introduction

Much public-sector-funded food and agricultural research for development is carried out through projects and programs. Donors and implementers increasingly expect that their investments and interventions make a meaningful difference to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of which there are 20, set at a global scale. For example, the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition is working in nine countries to end malnutrition in all its forms by 2030 (SDG2), with an annual budget of US\$45 million.<sup>1</sup> At a larger scale, the CGIAR intends to contribute to five so-called SDG-focused Impact Areas: (1) nutrition, health, and food security; (2) poverty reduction, livelihoods, and jobs; (3) gender equality, youth, and social inclusion; (4) climate adaptation and mitigation; and (5) environmental health and biodiversity, and in so doing contribute to impact targets in 13 out of 20 SDGs. The CGIAR calls itself the world's largest global innovation network with an annual budget in 2019 of US\$830 million.<sup>2</sup> To put the budget into perspective, it represents just 0.54%<sup>3</sup> of official development assistance provided by OECD countries in the same year.

Given the comparatively small budget allocation, if agricultural research for development projects and programs are to make a meaningful contribution to SDG targets, they will need to show how they will achieve leverage, i.e. show how relatively small investments can realistically be expected to trigger change at national or regional scale. One such lever is influencing policy change. Research, carried out at relatively little cost, can provide evidence that contributes to highly-impactful policies being implemented. For example, research investment of around US\$1 million, carried out by the CGIAR, has contributed to the design of US\$50 billion Indian

government program to support solar irrigation pumping. Part of the KUSUM program, as it is known, will connect over a million farmers to the electricity grid so that they can sell excess power and be motivated to pump less ground water. This will have far reaching impacts with respect to farmer income, reduction in emission of greenhouse gases (most of the electricity currently used for pumping is generated by coal-fired power stations), and reduction in over pumping of ground water (Verma, Durga and Shah 2019; Douthwaite and Shepherd 2020).

Another example of research influencing policy leading to impact is provided by the orange-fleshed sweetpotato outcome trajectory in Africa. By 2019, 6.2 million households in 15 countries in Africa had been reached by a CGIAR-led biofortification initiative to introduce orange-fleshed sweetpotato rich in pro-vitamin A (Low and Thiele 2020). Vitamin A deficiency in children has been linked to problems with vision, higher risks of infection, and mortality and stunting and is estimated to affect 48% of children in Africa in 2013 (Stevens et al. 2015). The level of reach was achieved in part through research that provided convincing evidence to the global nutrition community that biofortification was highly cost-effective, worked at scale (de Brauw et al. 2018), and therefore resources should be brought to bear to work on the outcome trajectory. Reallocation of resources is a policy-related outcome (Renkow 2018).

If a program is to plausibly claim that it has or can influence policy, it needs to explain how. This is not straightforward because policy making is influenced by a complex set of factors that change from context to context (Mueller 2020) involving a number of steps that can take a long time (Whelan 2008). As a result, scholars suggest the use of

Accordingly, this article seeks to answer two questions:

- In answering the questions, our overall objective is to demonstrate how evaluation can help programs become more convincing in the proposals they write to donors, more accountable, and better able to deliver on their goals.

We adopt the Realist position that an appropriate middle-range theory can help in the construction of program theory for a set of similar programs, while at the same time serve as a reusable conceptual platform to help in the accumulation of learning from the evaluation of one similar program to the next (Pawson 2013).

In summary, an outcome trajectory approach builds ToC to model the workings of the outcome trajectory and then describes the program's contribution to that trajectory. This is different to program theory evaluations that put the program at the center of the theory.

To achieve the article's objectives, we took advantage of an independent evaluation conducted by the CGIAR Research Program on Roots, Tubers and Bananas (RTB) together with a sister program on Agriculture for Health and Nutrition (A4NH). Leadership in both programs wanted to better understand and document their respective contributions to

**Table 1.** Four policy change cases considered in the evaluation (adapted with permission)

Case title	Main outcomes achieved
1. Mainstreaming of biofortification <sup>a</sup> in the African Union (AU)	A continental declaration has been drafted by the AU Commission (AUC) that endorses regional- and country-level operationalization of biofortification as a strategic step in accelerating the scale-up and adoption of biofortified crops and products.
2. Development of a cassava seed certification system in Tanzania	A cassava seed certification system is being increasingly put into place to control cassava mosaic disease (CMD) and cassava brown streak disease (CBSD) based on seed standards that have been passed into law to provide a regulatory framework
3. Development of a cassava seed certification system in Rwanda	The same as Tanzania, but in less time, having benefited from experience from Tanzania
4. Control of potato purple top (Purple Top—Spanish acronym) in Ecuador	Establishment of a national-level technical committee who have drafted a coordinated national control strategy.

<sup>a</sup>Biofortification is a process of increasing the density of vitamins and minerals in a crop through plant breeding or agronomic practices so that the biofortified crops, when consumed regularly, will generate measurable improvement in vitamin and mineral nutritional status.

policy change, in part to account to their investors for funds provided, and in part to learn and become more effective at influencing policy in the future. The first author was commissioned to carry out the work, in close collaboration with the co-authors who managed the evaluations on behalf of RTB and A4NH and subsequently contributed to cross-case analysis and writing this article.

RTB and A4NH chose the cases to be assessed (Table 1) as part of developing the terms of reference for the evaluations. Cases represent a sub-set of significant policy changes reported by program teams as plausibly linked to CGIAR contributions. Selected cases were the ones for which some information supporting plausible links was available and where the respective teams wanted their cases to be documented and analyzed.

We evaluated the four cases sequentially following the same approach, described in detail in Douthwaite et al. (in press). In summary, the steps were as follows:

- 1) Select the middle-range theory to be used across all four evaluations (Figure 1);
- 2) For each case, identify and describe the outcome trajectory that produced the policy outcomes with an annotated timeline;
- 3) Use the selected middle-range theory as the basis for a case-specific ToC that explains the workings of the respective outcome trajectory, i.e. how the strategies used by the trajectory actors contributed to a chosen policy outcome;
- 4) Validate the outcome trajectory timeline and the case-specific ToC with key trajectory actors;
- 5) Use the validated timeline and ToC to answer the evaluation questions and write the respective evaluation reports;
- 6) Subject each of the four draft reports for fact and inference with key trajectory actors;
- 7) Accumulate learning and generate insights by comparing and contrasting between the four cases, and specifying a ToC that works for all four cases (Figure 3).

Under Step 1, we searched the policy change literature for middle-range theories relevant to the cases to be evaluated. We identified a brief by [Stachowiak \(2013\)](#) that chose three of the six theoretical frameworks described in Sabatier's book. She simplified and explained them such that they could be more easily understood by evaluators and program implementers without a political science background. She considered two other theories that were not considered by [Sabatier \(2007\)](#)—'power politics' and 'regime.' The five middle-range

theories are summarized in Table 2. We sent Stachowiak’s brief to the key individuals involved in the first case we evaluated so that they could understand and chose the theory that best fitted their experiences.

We chose biofortification as the first case because it was the case where participants had worked more explicitly and for longer on influencing policy at scale. The key individuals chose the Policy Window theory (see [Figure 1](#)) as best describing their experiences. We then used the theory for the other three cases so as to test whether using the same analytical framework would help in practice to generate cross-case sights and learning. In doing so, we were reassured that Policy Window theory, originally developed by [Kingdon \(1995\)](#) and also known as the multiple-streams framework, has been found to be the most widely applicable to a variety of policy arenas ([Sabatier 2007](#)). We also considered whether elements of the other theories might better explain phenomenon we came across, and found that Coalition Theory did with respect to identifying coalition formation as a generative mechanism.

The Policy Window theory proposes that policy changes during *windows of opportunity*, which help champions successfully connect two or more components of the policy process. The components are: the way a *problem* is defined; the *policy solution* to the problem; and, the *politics* surrounding the issue (Zahariadis 2007; Stachowiak 2013). Windows of opportunity are moments when progress can be made. They can be created by natural events such as pandemics, droughts, or earthquakes. They can also be changes in government, budget cycles, or landmark meetings and summits held as part of ongoing sub-national, national, regional, and global processes. Policy windows are often short in duration and may or may not be predictable.

As part of Step 3, we developed a case-specific version of the generic theory to help identify and explain in which contexts and through which mechanisms the strategies used by the trajectory actors contributed to policy outcomes. We validated each of the four ToCs with key actors involved in the respective outcome trajectories and then used them to help answer the same evaluation questions for each case.

Each of the four case evaluations were reviewed by a subset of key trajectory actors, before being published by the CGIAR (Douthwaite 2020a,b,c,d).

## 4. Findings

In this section, we address our overall objective by carrying out cross-case analysis to answer the two questions described





**Table 3.** Characteristics of the four policy outcome trajectories, achievements to date, and potential for impact

	Biofortification declaration at continental-level	Cassava seed certification in Tanzania	Cassava seed certification in Rwanda	Control of Purple Top in Ecuador
Policy change sought	Continental declaration by the African Union in support of biofortification	Cassava seed certification system implemented by a national government	Cassava seed certification system implemented by a national government	Coordinated national-level response to control Purple Top
Main outcome achieved to date	Continental declaration drafted and awaiting ratification	Standards published; TOSCI 5-Year action plan for Cassava Seed Certification approved	Standards published	National technical committee established; control strategy drafted
Further work required	Advocating to include biofortification in National Agricultural Investment Plans	Develop a market-led cassava seed system that takes standards into account	Develop a market-led cassava seed system that takes standards into account	National technical committee to show strong leadership and be adequately funded
Key trajectory actors	Policy owner: AUC-DREA Research: CGIAR, AUDA, FARA, Donor: BMGF, DFID	Policy Owner: TOSCI Research: CGIAR, TARI, MEDA Donor: BMGF	Policy owner: RSB Research: CGIAR, RAB, RALIS, INAGBO Donor: IFAD	Policy owner: MAG Research: INIAP, Agrocalidad, CGIAR, FAO, Central University Donor: AECID, CIP
Year trajectory took shape	2015	2012	2017	2018
Estimated investment in the policy trajectory (US\$)	Millions	Hundreds of thousands	Hundreds of thousands	Tens of thousands
Potential number of beneficiaries	Millions of women and young children in Africa consuming biofortified foods and millions of farmers growing biofortified varieties	Millions of cassava farmers in Tanzania	Hundreds of thousands of farmers in Rwanda	Tens of thousands of farmers in Ecuador; potential spillover benefits for hundreds of thousands of farmers in the Andes

AECID: Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation; Agrocalidad: Agency responsible for phytosanitary and zoosanitary regulation and control in Ecuador; AUC-DREA: African Union Commission-Department of Rural Economy and Agriculture; AUDA: African Union Development Agency; BMGF: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; CIP: International Potato Center; DFID: Department for International Development; FAO: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; FARA: Forum for Agriculture Research for Africa; IFAD: International Fund for Agricultural Development; INAGBO: Rwanda Farmers' Trade Union; INIAP: National Institute of Agricultural Research (Ecuador); MAG: Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock; MEDA: Mennonite Economic Development Associates; RAB: Rwanda Agricultural Board; RALIS: Rwanda Agriculture and Livestock Inspection Services; RSB: Rwanda Standards Board; TARI: Tanzania Agricultural Research Institute; TOSCI: Tanzania Official Seed Certification Institute.

developed in 1997 by a project in which IITA participated, 15 years before a version of it was finally approved in Tanzania as the basis of seed certification regulations.

#### 4.1 Q1: How can middle-range theory be used to accumulate and synthesize learning and insight from one evaluation to the next?

We answer this question by doing what the question asks—trying in practice to accumulate and synthesize learning and insight by using the Policy Window theory (Figure 1) as a reusable conceptual framework across the four published cases. We do so by addressing sub questions (SQs) corresponding to elements of the middle-range theory, case by case. The first three SQs unpack how the three main outcomes—shift in social norms, change in capacity, and strengthened support base—shown in the Policy Window theory were generated in each case by strategies implemented by trajectory actors. The fourth SQ explores how useful the Policy Window ToC and a realist perspective were in understanding how trajectory actors contributed to policy change in the four cases.

##### 4.1.1 SQ1: How did the 'shift in social norms' outcome manifest itself in the four cases?

The outcome 'influence social norms' took on specific meaning in the four cases. In each case, the outcome was increasing shared agreement by actors within and outside the respective

outcome trajectories as to the nature and severity of the problem on one hand, and the potential and practicality of the proposed solution on the other.

Table 4 shows the strategies used by key actors in the four respective outcome trajectories to bring about a 'shift in social norms.' Analysis of the cases found that the actors used three types of strategies—framing the problem, framing the solution, and communication.

##### 4.1.1.1 Framing the problem

In three of the trajectories, the problem to be addressed was relatively well understood which allowed for most of the effort to shift social norms to focus on developing, proving, framing, and communicating the respective policy solutions. The exception was the Ecuador case where Purple Top was a new disease that needed to be better understood before a set of control measures could be identified and agreed upon. The disease, which first arrived in Ecuador in 2012, proved to be difficult to diagnose. In contrast, cassava mosaic disease (CMD) and cassava brown streak disease (CBSD) have been present in Tanzania and Rwanda for at least 85 and 110 years, respectively, and the problem they pose is relatively well understood, albeit both viruses have become more virulent in the last 25 years. The CBSD and CMD problem was framed by research published in 2006<sup>4</sup> that estimated the diseases threatened income security for over 30 million African



putting out press releases. In the Rwanda case, their impact benefited from a heightened concern about CBSD following a very large outbreak. This led to a number of news stories being published, in particular by the New Times newspaper. These stories were particularly effective because they confirmed what politicians were hearing from their constituents in cassava growing areas. In contrast, communication on Purple Top control was largely limited to presentations at conferences by INIAP, Agrocalidad, and the Central University, due to lack of project funding.

#### 4.1.1.4 Evolving strategies and interaction

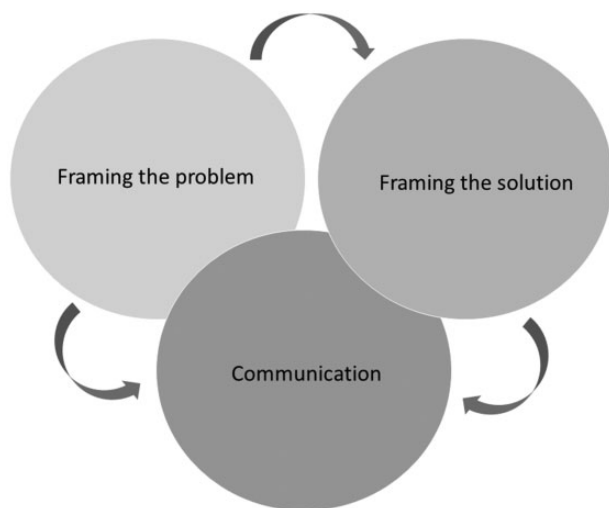
The three strategies just considered overlap and co-evolved together, as shown in [Figure 2](#). Framing the problem clearly is an important first step that leads to framing the solution. Communication can combine elements of the problem and the solution to foster shifts in social norms. This comes through clearly in the Purple Top case where communication was linked closely with the framing of the problem through presentations at conferences and stakeholder events. Similarly, the Rwanda case showed how newspaper communication during a large outbreak linked the problem of CBSD with the solution provided by seed system regulation.

#### 4.1.2 SQ 2: How did the 'change in capacity' outcome manifest itself in the four cases?

Table 5 shows the strategies used by key actors in the four respective outcome trajectories to bring about ‘changes in capacity.’ It shows there is a difference in whether trajectory actors invested in formal advocacy, informal advocacy, or both, where formal advocacy is carried out by acknowledged champions and informal advocacy is carried out as part of professional discourse without the advocate necessarily being aware that they are playing that role.

#### 4.1.2.1 Increasing capacity to carry out formal advocacy

Actors in biofortification and cassava seed system trajectories were explicit that they carried out advocacy to bring about desired policy changes. In the former, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) funded two consecutive CGIAR- and FARA-led projects to train national and regional networks of ‘champions’ to advocate for biofortification in Africa over a



**Figure 2.** Sequence and interaction between strategies used to prompt shifts in social norms.

period of 6 years. Capacity development included showing participants how to link biofortification into broader nutrition policy processes, in particular through holding side events at high-level meetings on nutrition. Champions were crucial in creating bridges to communicate with higher level decision makers.

In Tanzania, a CGIAR-led component of a project recruited and supported District-level champions to advocate for the use of government funding allocated to Districts to promote cassava as a cash crop. The thinking was that the seed certification system would only be viable if farmers earn enough to pay for certified planting material.

#### 4.1.2.2 Increasing capacity to carry out informal advocacy

The evaluations found that in Tanzania and Rwanda advocacy messages traveled ‘informally’ through the professional links that existed between CGIAR staff and their counterparts working in the respective national agricultural research and extension systems. National staff shared ownership of the seed certification work with CGIAR staff. They also had links to policy makers and had sufficient agency to help push the policy process forward. What worked in practice was the combination of broad, consultative workshops to frame the problem and solution, the formation of an inclusive technical working group in each country to develop the standards and one-on-one meetings between informal champions and key decision-makers. Funding to support this work came from CGIAR- and NGO-led projects that built on previous projects in support of the respective outcome trajectories.

These empirical findings suggest that informal advocacy is possible when individuals pushing for a policy change have strong working relationships with colleagues who themselves are close in network terms to the pivotal decision-makers. When the network distance<sup>6</sup> is greater, e.g. when working at a continental scale as with the AU, or at District level in Tanzania, then champions need to be enlisted through a more formal and explicit process so as to bridge the network gap.

#### 4.1.2.3 Increasing capacity to implement the solutions

In the two cassava seed trajectories, capacity development of farmers, seed producers, seed inspectors, and laboratory staff were important for seed certification to happen, in part by convincing key decision-makers that cassava seed certification was implementable and worthwhile. In Tanzania, trajectory actors trained cassava food processors in how to use cassava flour to replace more expensive imports of wheat flour, and in so doing take advantage of a market opportunity.

Capacity development was also important to help farmers know how to control Purple Top, even though there was no consensus on how best to do so. The evaluations found some indication that lack of public-sector support to the trajectory allowed agri-chemical suppliers to promote greater use of insecticides than public sector bodies would recommend.

#### 4.1.3 SQ 3: How does the ‘strengthened support base’ outcome manifest itself in the four cases?

In all four cases, a ‘strengthened support base’ manifested itself as a more enabling political and financial environment for the four respective policy changes (Table 1).

Table 6 shows the strategies used by key actors in the four respective outcome trajectories to bring about a ‘strengthened support base.’ Analysis of the cases found that the actors















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