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THEORY-BASED EVALUATION OF INCLUSIVE BUSINESS PROGRAMMES

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Monitoring Systemic Change in Inclusive Agribusiness*

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Abstract Evaluations of private sector development programmes look at what changed to the workings of the system, and whether these changes are scalable, resilient, and sustainable. We present an evaluation lens that primarily qualifies changes to the systemic nature of food provisioning in markets. It converts theoretical frameworks into 'antennae' receptive to early signs of systemic effects of inclusive agribusiness that fosters food and nutrition security. The tools for this theory-informed approach were developed and applied in 2SCALE, a Dutch-funded programme aiming to incubate inclusive agribusiness and contribute to food and nutrition security goals in Africa. The article reflects on what to monitor to detect early signs of systemic effects and how monitoring can be embedded in unfolding business and partnering processes. It concludes that taking a theory-informed approach gives directionality to strategising and planning, and enhances capacities of partners in inclusive business projects to lead actions towards realising systemic effects.

Keywords inclusive development, partnerships, food and nutrition security, Africa, evaluation.

1 Introduction

Involving the private sector in achieving the public goals of food and nutrition security has led to a variety of market-led programmes that aim for inclusive agribusiness. Cross-sector partnering has been given increased prominence as a pathway to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (Stibbe, Reid and Gilbert 2019). Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17, framed by the United Nations, reinforces this instrumental notion of partnerships as a key vehicle for achieving the goals overall.

However, the capacity of partnerships to contribute to these sustainable development outcomes is far from self-evident (Vellema, Schouten and van Tulder 2020). Partnering processes

navigate the unfolding interactions among diverse actors in a joint endeavour towards development goals and simultaneously aim to realise impacts in changing complex systems that are rather unpredictable (van Tulder and Keen 2018). Accordingly, the process of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) should be able to move along with the evolving dynamics of interventions and strategies induced by partnerships, and offer information and reflection or sense-making moments that support adaptive management.

In addition, the use of public resources also demands that partnerships are accountable for their claimed impacts on food and nutrition security, which comprise contributions to systemic changes (Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition 2016; Haddad *et al.* 2016; Posthumus *et al.* 2018a, 2018b).

The dynamics of partnering processes in combination with the systemic nature of transformative processes provides challenges for M&E. Therefore, the scope of M&E in partnerships working on the combined goals of inclusive agribusiness and food and nutrition must capture the systemic nature of the transformation processes. At the same time, it must consider the boundaries of the span of influence of the concrete activities implemented by partners working towards inclusive agribusiness in complex and rapidly changing market environments.

In response, literature has increasingly focused on assessing the assumed systemic or system-level change (Ramirez *et al.* 2018; Dentoni, Pinkse and Lubberink 2021). The approach to monitoring inclusive agribusiness presented in this article complements M&E approaches that look for systemic change through replication or responses by actors outside the sphere of the intervention programme, such as the Adopt-Adapt-Expand-Respond (AAER) approach (Nippard, Hitchins and Elliott 2014; Taylor and Lomax, this *IDS Bulletin*). This line of inquiry is central to the Donor Committee for Enterprise Development (DCED) standard – a framework for enhancing the quality of M&E of private sector development programmes – that defines systemic change as 'a modification to how a system works, and what happens as a result' (Kessler 2021: 5).

The DCED standard uses three criteria to identify whether a change is indeed systemic: **sustainability** – i.e. it should be able to continue without input from the project under evaluation; **scalability** – i.e. it should be capable of benefiting increasing numbers of people over time; and **resilience** – i.e. it should be able to adapt to changing conditions (*ibid.*). For example, the pragmatic approach to assessing system change outlined by Posthumus *et al.* (2020) combines an 'intervention lens' with a 'helicopter lens'. The 'intervention lens' is meant to assess the scale, sustainability, and impact of the changes introduced by programme interventions, while the 'helicopter lens' is designed to assess responses or changes in the broader system.

From a donor perspective, effects on the broader sector or system are important because, as clarified by Ton (2021), direct support to specific business-driven programmes is only considered legitimate when it addresses constraints in a way that benefits other (competing) firms. This article complements these pragmatic approaches to assessing systems changes by presenting a theory-informed approach, which aims to qualify systemic changes associated with inclusive agribusiness and to use early signs of systemic effects in their deliberations. It aims to enhance M&E practice, both in terms of what to monitor in order to detect early signs of systemic effects and how monitoring can be embedded in business-led partnering processes.

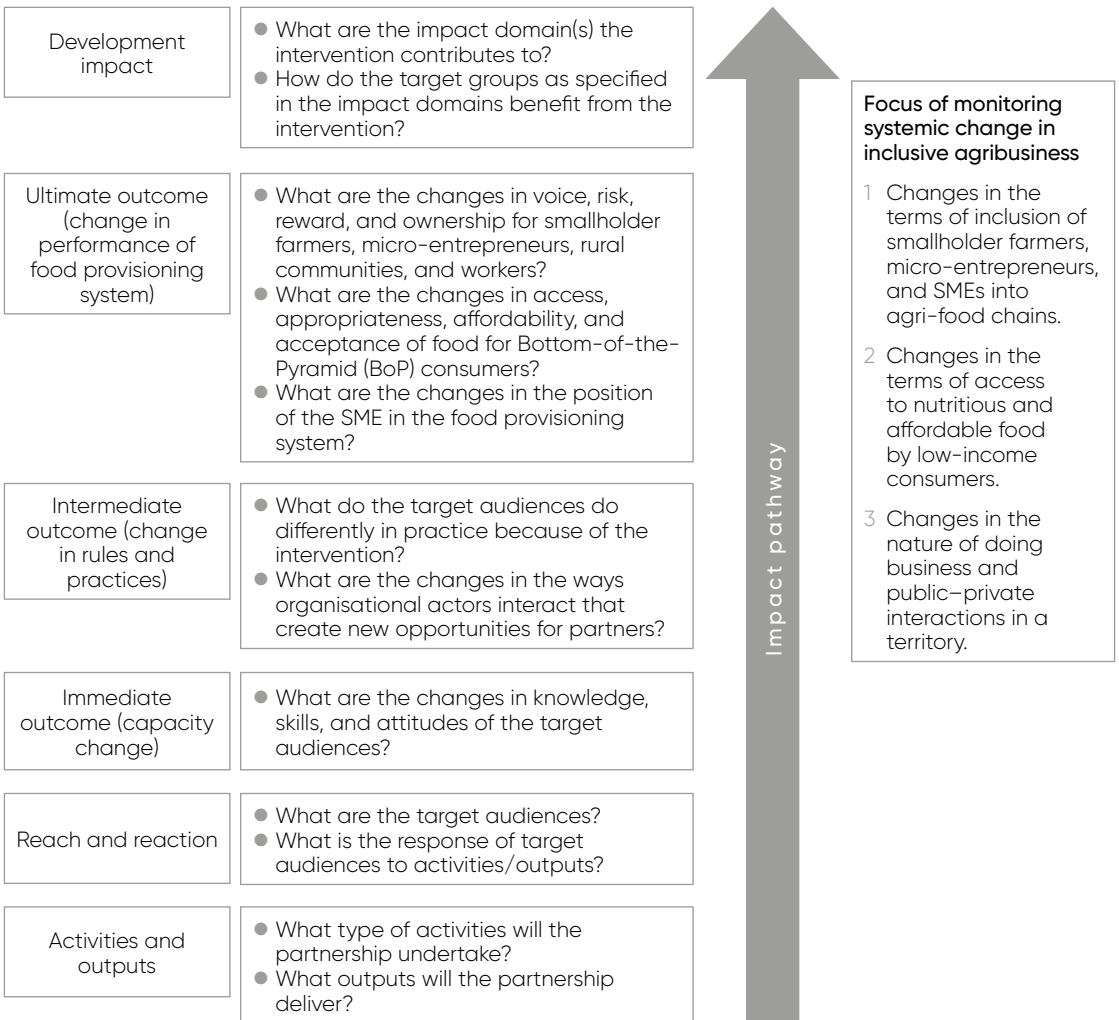
To that end, we use experiences with the design and implementation of M&E in the 2SCALE programme,⁴ which supports partnerships that aim to incubate inclusive agribusiness that fosters food and nutrition security in Africa. The 2SCALE programme works in partnership with so-called 'business champions', i.e. companies open to fitting an inclusiveness agenda into their commercial strategy as players in their markets. The 2SCALE programme has a strong focus on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and its partnership facilitators support collaborating businesses. Besides agribusinesses, partnerships supported by 2SCALE can involve producers' organisations, governments, and a variety of technical and financial service providers. The M&E system in 2SCALE combines several theoretical frameworks to develop 'antennae' that are able to detect early signals of systemic change resulting from the actions and changes in practices of inclusive agribusiness which foster food and nutrition security. The use of these antennae opens space to make the search for systemic change an integral part of reflection and strategising processes of 2SCALE's partners.

The article first presents, in Section 2, the generic format used for describing impact pathways developed and implemented in the 2SCALE programme, which captures systemic changes as part of the ultimate outcomes. Section 3 describes how this theory-informed understanding of systemic change is embedded in processes of facilitated learning and reflection, and becomes part of adaptive management. Then, Section 4 presents examples from 2SCALE that clarify how a theory-informed approach to monitoring systemic change, as an integral part of learning and reflection processes, guides adaptive management. The article ends with a discussion (Section 5) on how this approach to monitoring systemic change fits the dynamics of intervention programmes that strive for inclusive business models, which contribute to food and nutrition security while navigating complex market environments.

2 Capturing systemic change

Theory-informed antennae that are sensitive to signals of systemic change are integrated into the design of the M&E system and concentrate on the tandem of food provisioning

Figure 1 Generic format for impact pathways used in 2SCALE



Source Authors' own, adapted from Partnerships Resource Centre/2SCALE (2021).

and the nature of doing business. Food provisioning is the core function of the system in which the business partners operate. Companies sourcing, processing, and/or distributing food are central to this system in that they make the connection between the production and consumption of food (Reardon 2015; Liverpool-Tasie *et al.* 2020). The companies involved operate in the context of an area-specific history of competition and coordination when doing business, and of interactions between business and state (Whitley 1999; Helmsing and Vellema 2011). It is assumed that the actions of the business partners are directed towards inclusive development, and that linking smallholder producers and poor consumers to these agribusiness companies can be considered as systemic (Birney 2021): the actions refashion

rules and practices ingrained in doing business, and construct or modify social relations in food provisioning. Accordingly, the scope of monitoring systemic change is defined by a set of mutually constituting practices that are functional to food provisioning and embedded in a spatially bounded business system of interacting private and public sector actors.

To discover the systemic effects, the M&E system in 2SCALE integrates evaluative thinking based on contribution analysis and Action Research. The M&E system uses a generic format for impact pathways (IP) that includes the distinction between types of outcomes made in contribution analysis (Ton *et al.* 2019; Ton 2021). Central to the IP-format is a sequence of immediate, intermediate, and ultimate outcomes (see Figure 1). The IP-format envisions a change process that goes from changes in the capacities and skills of target audiences (immediate outcomes), which subsequently are supposed to lead to changes in practices, rules, and interactions between partners and target audiences (intermediate outcomes). The IP-format logically links these changes. The immediate and intermediate outcomes give direction to finding traceable changes in the system of food provisioning and the nature of doing business. These systemic changes are operationalised as intended ultimate outcomes. The IPs explicate how the partners envision contributing to the ultimate outcomes, and how this process can be monitored.

Considering a defined set of ultimate outcomes as signs of systemic change requires qualifying the systemic effects of inclusive agribusiness. The M&E system builds upon an institutional perspective on inclusive development in the context of food provisioning; it combines multiple theory-informed frameworks to further qualify systemic changes and capture these as ultimate outcomes of inclusive agribusiness in food provisioning (Schouten and Vellema 2019; Vellema *et al.* 2020). In contrast to the immediate and intermediate outcomes in the IP that are defined by the partners, the Action Research team delineated a specific set of ultimate outcomes linked to scholarly literature. This offers three categories of systemic change to focus on.

First, the M&E system aims to capture changes in the terms on which smallholder farmers or micro-entrepreneurs are involved in commercial activities: the 'terms of inclusion' of smallholder farmers and other economic actors (Vermeulen and Cotula 2010; Thorpe 2018; Chamberlain and Anseeuw 2019). Second, it looks for changes in the conditions under which low-income consumers access their daily food: the so-called 'terms of access' (Thorpe and Reed 2016; Lashitew, Bals and van Tulder 2020; London 2020). These two categories are key to inclusive development and represent systemic change in food provisioning.

In addition, a third key assumption underlying 2SCALE is that realising inclusive development in food provisioning requires

inclusive agribusinesses to take the lead in doing 'business as unusual' (2SCALE 2019). The 'unusual' business practices are expected to lead and direct the transformation of the nature of doing business, which partly determines whether changes in the terms of inclusion and terms of access materialise. The M&E system considers SME leadership in 'business as unusual' as a third category of systemic change. It focuses on whether the partnership is able to change the nature of doing business in a commercially viable way, and whether their endeavours to enhance inclusiveness of agribusiness attract reinforcing responses by other private and public actors in the business environment.

The Action Research component of the M&E system is tasked to search with partners for signs of systemic effects, and the team engages in and supports data collection to track the consequences of the partnering processes. Realising that capturing systemic change is not an easy task, the M&E/Action Research team takes the lead. The M&E/Action Research is composed of one member based in each country, who interacts closely with the 2SCALE partnerships facilitators and supports data collection and processing. It also involves three part-time Action Researchers based in the Netherlands, who connect M&E to scientific knowledge on inclusive development and partnerships, and design and revise the systematics used for the M&E tools. A prime task of the team is to conduct interviews with partners and key stakeholders, translate the conceptualisation of the three categories of systemic change into palatable questions, and proactively look for possible signs of systemic change in the situated actions of the partnerships. Continuous interactions of the team with the partnership facilitators enables an intentional focus on inclusive agribusiness.

To monitor systemic change, the three categories of ultimate outcomes as introduced above have been further operationalised into a protocol (see Table 1). First, the Action Research looks for changes in the terms of inclusion of smallholder farmers (SHFs) and micro-entrepreneurs. The 'terms of inclusion' are specified in four dimensions: ownership, voice, risk, and reward (Vermeulen and Cotula 2010; Chamberlain and Anseeuw 2019). This operationalisation enables a nuanced understanding of the actual conditions under which SHFs and micro-entrepreneurs are included in business practices. It goes beyond measuring prices and income effects and tries to detect the institutional and procedural features of inclusion, by looking at SHFs and micro-entrepreneurs' voice in decision-making procedures, and the way risks and rewards are divided among (business) partners (Thorpe 2018).

Second, the 'terms of access' are further detailed into four dimensions: affordability, acceptability, availability, and appropriateness (Thorpe and Reed 2016). To address

Table 1 Operationalisation of ultimate outcomes for monitoring systemic change in 2SCALE impact pathway

Terms of inclusion of SHFs and micro-entrepreneurs	<p>Ownership: the division of assets such as land and processing facilities between SHFs and/or micro-entrepreneurs on the one hand and the company/lead firm on the other hand.</p> <p>Voice: the ability of SHFs and/or micro-entrepreneurs to influence key business decisions. This includes their weight in decision-making processes, arrangements for review and grievance, and mechanisms for dealing with asymmetries in information access.</p> <p>Risk: the division of risks between SHFs and/or micro-entrepreneurs on the one hand and the company/lead firm on the other. These risks derive from uncertainties in production, changes in demand of consumers and supply of producers, and wider political and reputational risks.</p> <p>Reward: the division of economic costs and benefits between SHFs and/or micro-entrepreneurs on the one hand and the company/lead firm on the other. This includes price-setting and finance arrangements.</p>
Terms of access for Bottom-of-the-Pyramid (BoP) consumers	<p>Affordability: the alignment between the cost (and the associated price) of a product, and the consumer's willingness and ability to pay for the product. This dimension is thus determined by the household's cash flow on the one hand, and the cost of developing, producing, marketing, and distributing the food on the other hand.</p> <p>Acceptability: the alignment between the characteristics of the food offered and the daily diets in the social and cultural context of the consumer. This dimension is thus determined by the choice and design of a product offered on the one hand. On the other hand, it is determined by the consumer's customs, taste, and habits. It is determined by the consumer's ideas and convictions about food, by preparation time and other preparation requirements, and by awareness of the product and its benefits.</p> <p>Availability: the alignment between the location where the food is provided and the place where the intended consumer is located. This dimension is thus determined by the market or channel through which the product is sold.</p> <p>Appropriateness: the alignment between the quality and safety of the product offered and the consumer's needs and knowledge regarding quality, quantity, and frequency of consumption. This dimension is thus determined by the consistency of the nutritional quality and safety of the product on the one hand, and the (knowledge about the) quantity, frequency, and the way in which the product is prepared and consumed on the other hand.</p>
Leadership in inclusive agribusiness	<p>Inclusive business model: Leadership in inclusive agribusiness means anchoring development objectives into a commercially viable venture. This relates to the restructuring of an organisation's business model that is typically performed in order to combine commercial viability and development impact.</p> <p>Clustering: Leadership becomes visible when a company embeds its operations in a wider cluster of economic actors. This dimension refers to economies of scale and developing joint capacities to be competitive.</p> <p>Crowding in: Leadership means bringing others on board and mobilising their capacities and resources. This dimension deals with collaborative arrangements led by SMEs towards achieving joint goals that upgrade the sector, industry, or more broadly, food provisioning in an area.</p>

Source Partnerships Resource Centre/2SCALE (2021).

undernutrition, poor households need to have access to nutritious food provided through accessible market channels. Thereto, the food product needs to be affordable; it needs to be available by being offered in market channels geographically proximate to low-income consumers; consumers need to be aware of the product and its characteristics and need to accept the food socially and culturally; and the product needs to be safe, and valuable and credible to the consumer's situation, in the sense that it is aligned to the low-income consumers' dietary needs (Wertheim-Heck, Vellema and Spaargaren 2015).

Third, the dimension of 'leadership in business as unusual' connects the above process of inclusive development to the nature of doing business. This becomes visible in sustained business operations or investments before and after the support, and assumes that business and inclusive development, while unusual in the sector, can be configured in a commercially viable way. It implies monitoring how and whether business entities (including professional cooperatives) drive and diffuse the inclusive business agenda, by means of three types of processes derived from business literature by the M&E team: promoting and spreading inclusive business practices, clustering of value chain actors functional to inclusive agribusiness, and crowding in of actors in the wider public and private networks.

Monitoring the emergence of 'business as unusual' as systemic change looks for how the entanglement of competition and collaboration affects the nature of business practices and the consequential relations of the inclusive agribusiness with other businesses or micro-entrepreneurs in the value chain (Ayakwah, Sepulveda and Lyon 2018). In addition, it directs attention to modes of clustering of economic actors, other than farmers, in the proximity of the leading inclusive agribusiness (Geldes *et al.* 2017; Gebru *et al.* 2019). Clustering of interdependent business practices is assumed to create conducive conditions for developing joint capacities, creating economies of scale, and collaboratively articulating the potential of inclusive agribusiness.

Finally, it relates to signs of crowding in (Fowler and Dunn 2014; Nippard *et al.* 2014) reflected in public and private actors adjusting their practices in reaction to the workings and emerging institutional features (Lawrence, Hardy and Phillips 2002) of inclusive agribusiness realised by the partners. These actors may reorganise, take on new roles and responsibilities, or develop their own offers, in a manner that is supportive to and may even accelerate the realisation of inclusive agribusiness.

3 Embedding M&E in partnering processes

The M&E system in 2SCALE combines a systematic and flexible use of IPs, which enables M&E to follow partnerships that are navigating diverse interests and dynamic market environments. The design of the M&E system recognises that partnering and

change processes are unique and context-specific, which implies that each partnership represents a time- and place-specific case of situated action that generates change (Vellema *et al.* 2013). Accordingly, the approach to M&E is partly based on a case-based analysis of partnership-specific IPs, which are re-specified regularly in a participatory manner. To make the M&E system fit the situated dynamics of partnerships, efforts were made to simplify the tools without compromising compliance with the DCED standard for result measurement:⁵ for example, focus on only two or three IPs, use a linear but flexible format, rely strongly on self-reporting, and limit the number of indicators for which data are collected.

In 2SCALE, partnerships are supported to construct a theory of change with two or three IPs, with the intention to centre learning and reflection on strategic choices rather than start from a long list of actions (Faling, Vellema and Schouten 2020; Vellema *et al.* 2017). The aim of integrating systemic change as theory-informed ultimate outcomes in the IPs is to provide some directionality; however, the specification of what contributes to change processes leading to systemic changes in food provisioning and agribusiness is the responsibility of the partners.

In addition, the design recognises that ultimate outcomes are usually visible at the edge of the span of influence of the partnership. Hence, monitoring ultimate outcomes enables partners to specify how their collaboration contributes to systemic change and to recognise how this combines with external influences. Evidence for the partnership's contribution largely results from, and conversely informs, the continuous process of facilitated reflection and governance meetings of the partnerships supported by 2SCALE.

Partners frame and revise their strategies towards inclusive agribusiness using the IP-format (see Figure 1). Each partnership starts with a Diagnostic and Design (D&D) workshop and subsequently organises annual Reflect and Adapt (R&A) workshops. The framing and refinement of IPs result from these participatory processes. The partners and the M&E team jointly identify so-called 'Markers for Change' (M4Cs), which are qualitative and quantitative indications of progress and achievement linked to each immediate, intermediate, and ultimate outcome. The M&E team collaborates closely with the partners and the 2SCALE partnership facilitator to collect and process the evidence linked to each M4C. This informs annual R&A workshops organised with the partners, where a wider group of partners and stakeholders discusses progress made and reflects on the strategic choices underlying the IPs. Questions posed include: is the strategic orientation of the IPs still correct; is there reason to redirect or revise the IPs; is there more clarity about how the actions and partnering contribute to inclusive agribusiness for fostering food and nutrition security?

Embedding M&E in facilitated processes aims to enable partners to use the monitoring of outcomes in their reflections and deliberations. Understandably, the specification of the ultimate outcomes, which qualify the systemic changes underlying inclusive agribusiness, becomes more refined when the partnership matures. The interactions with the M&E team, conducting interviews with partners and partnership facilitators based on a protocol attuned to the approach outlined above, and the discussions during the subsequent R&A workshops, help to situate the reported systemic change. The format for an IP funnels the activities and outcomes to observable systemic changes.

4 Strategising towards systemic change: examples from 2SCALE

The theory-informed framing of ultimate outcomes (see Table 1) helped to find (early) signs of unfolding systemic changes, which informed priority-setting by partners. The qualification of systemic changes that can be associated with working on inclusive agribusiness is useful as a search device: where are partnerships moving towards and how do they get there? Using ultimate outcomes both to capture systemic change and to inform adaptive management and priority-setting brings the notion of systemic change closer to actual choice-making by partners. This section presents two examples of how the approach to M&E connects to adaptive management in partnerships. Both selected examples are geared towards the terms of inclusion at the upstream side of the agri-food chain, although our lens equally aims to capture signs of systemic change towards the consumer end of the chain. The first example describes how monitoring the terms of inclusion for smallholder farmers informs adaptive management. The second example displays how signs of systemic change enabled partners to capture and demonstrate systemic effects of partnerships that are navigating dynamic business environments.

4.1 Example 1: refashioning terms of inclusion

The first example presents a reflection process informed by monitoring the initially formulated IPs. It exemplifies how M&E supports partnerships to adapt their strategy and include other target audiences in efforts to refashion the terms of inclusion of smallholder farmers.⁶

Central to the partnership is an agro-processing company in Kenya, which decided to create a fortified food division for institutional buyers, such as schools or hospitals, with nutritious food products. Later, they expanded to low-income consumer markets. The main ingredient that the company used was imported soy. The strategy of the partnership aimed to shift to local sourcing of soybeans from smallholder farmers. Therefore, the partnership adopted a strategic focus on the terms of inclusion of smallholder farmers, as main suppliers of soybeans. The narrative below integrates the reflections among partners on the four aspects of inclusion: voice, ownership, risk, and reward.

In the first phase of the partnership, the company adopted a leading role in organising the sourcing from smallholder farmers. Most of the activities (almost 80 per cent) focused on training farmers and providing technical services and access to seed and other inputs. For these activities, the partnership spent 55 per cent of the available 2SCALE budget and almost 80 per cent of the financial contribution of the company. Access to seed was what farmer representatives labelled as the reward of the partnership. However, in the reflections, the business clarified that its buying capacity was limited. Therefore, smallholder farmers were hesitant to plant soybean and purchase quality seeds: the farmer representatives expressed that the uncertain purchase of their produce was considered a major risk, both for farmers and for the partnership.

Failure to guarantee a market and offer fair compensation to farmers would jeopardise the realisation of inclusive business objectives. Smallholder farmers owned land and produce, and the company owned the processing facility. Ownership of the means and resources underlying commercial transactions, (i.e. working capital to make the actual purchase and make payments, logistical infrastructure for aggregation, and transportation equipment of the soybeans), were less clearly embedded in the partnership. This absence was also reflected in one of the initial IPs of the partnership, which centred strongly on increasing productivity at farm level.

During the R&A workshop and subsequent governance meetings of the partnership, farmer representatives were enabled to voice their concerns about the low offtake by the company, which emerged as a source of tension in the partnership. This intensified because farmers claimed that prices offered by the company were not competitive and payments were delayed, which made buying planting materials and entering into an agreement with the company less rewarding. Seemingly, the limited buying capacity of the agro-processing company generated risks for smallholder farmers who had decided to plant soybean based on the assumed access to a reliable buyer. Participants in the R&A workshop confirmed that the company was not able to buy and in response the partnership facilitator teamed up with others to find a buyer for the soybeans. The participants identified the exclusive reliance on a single buyer as problematic and opened space to redirect their deliberation to the terms of inclusion of smallholder farmers and aggregators, and particularly the risks and unintended effects of the inclusive business model.

As a consequence of the R&A workshop, partners decided to refocus their strategy and involve aggregators that were closer to farmers, with the capacity to navigate the seasonal fluctuation of prices, demand and supply, and could create access to alternative market channels. Moreover, these aggregators were able to organise direct payments, which proved to be

more complicated for the company central to the partnership, which was located outside the rural communities. A practical consequence of the reflection by partners was to engage with aggregators in realising inclusive agribusiness; this involved payment modalities attuned to the situation in rural communities, transparent ways of coping with marketing risks, and taking into account the capacities and interests of farmers, as the primary owners of the soybeans. Consequently, the partnerships opted not only to focus on the inclusion of smallholder farmers but to enlarge the scope of the strategy to include intermediate aggregators. This also brought new challenges – namely, how to handle risks and rewards in a way that was favourable to smallholder farmers.

A revised IP reflected this change in strategic direction. The revised IP started with supporting the skill and capacity development of aggregators to engage with smallholder farmers who were facing risks as an immediate outcome: the number of aggregators involved and experiences with multiple arrangements shared in this process were chosen as indicators. As an intermediate outcome, which focuses on changes in practices, rules, and relationships in the business, the partnership aimed for establishing a network with an aggregation centre and linked mini-aggregation hubs. These hubs also offered space for building hubs to distribute seeds.

The performance of this network would become visible in the share of soybean sourced, which was selected as an indicator for the intermediate outcome. Ultimately, this was assumed to contribute to changing the terms of inclusion of smallholder farmers, who had reliable access to aggregation centres that were able to offer attractive prices for their produce and ensure access to affordable seeds and inputs. The partners agreed to track the number of aggregators selling to the company as a measure for this ultimate outcome, and to investigate the quality of their relationship. The process of reflection and revising IPs helped partners to identify centres of aggregation as the preferred target audience for refashioning the terms of inclusion of smallholder farmers.

4.2 Example 2: reconfiguring business relations

The second example reveals how the delineated ultimate outcomes guide partnerships in capturing systemic change; it zooms in on the emerging configuration of leading inclusive agribusiness, clustering other economic actors around the enterprise, and crowding in of public and private sectors in the area. By monitoring the reconfiguration of business relations and the nature of doing business, it is possible to focus on leadership of the main business partner in attracting other businesses to the unfolding process of making agribusiness inclusive.⁷

The core business of the Nigerian business partner was to supply large food and beverage companies with high quality

cassava starch. The company managed a 400-hectare nucleus farm and a processing factory with a capacity of 50 tonnes/day. At the start of the partnership with 2SCALE, it worked with 200 farmers contracted as out-growers. The company decided to expand its sourcing basis and increase the number of smallholder farmers included in its business. Initially, the interventions focused on training, input provisioning, and tractor services aimed to increase productivity and yields of newly contracted smallholder farmers.

The emerging coordination between company and farmers created a breeding ground for complementary initiatives by a network of transporters. Timely delivery of cassava roots is essential for processing companies. However, farmers working with the company complained about overcharging and low reliability of the transporters, while the transporters complained about the high costs due to an array of levies and taxes at local government level and at checkpoints. This hampered the expansion of the sourcing base, which was crucial for making inclusive agribusiness commercially viable. Interestingly, the collaboration and coordination between company and farmers appeared to be of interest for transporters.

One of the tangible steps taken by the company was to offer transporters and truck drivers a sticker showing that they worked for the company. A condition was to register as a transporter and comply with the relevant regulations. Eventually, more than 30 transporters registered with the company. This clustering of the transporters in the business of sourcing and processing cassava modified the nature of doing business, mainly due to increased transparency in the computing of transport fees. The fees shifted from payment per trip to payment per weight, and factored in distances between clusters of farmers and the company. A weighing bridge at the site of the company increased the transparency of costs for transportation for both transporters and farmers.

Moreover, the reduced transportation costs were one of the reasons that made inclusion in the business model attractive for farmers. The transporters themselves experienced reduced delays at checkpoints. Building relationships with transporters enlarged the cluster of actors who supported making inclusive agribusiness commercially viable, and enabled the company to connect to agribusiness clusters involving a growing number of smallholder farmers. The leading business in the partnership recognised the alignment with transporters as a crucial element of inclusive agribusiness, and directed their actions towards realising this.

The emerging coordinated actions in the cluster generated a process of crowding in of public and private actors, which reduced costs even more. Local government agreed to charge transporters per day and no longer per trip. The partnership supported transporters in accessing credit for repairs and maintenance, and even for buying new trucks. This set of mutually constituting

practices enabled the company to expand its network of supplying farmers from 200 to 2,000 smallholder farmers.

Capturing the process of reconfiguring business relations as systemic change is appreciative of the navigation process of a business taking the lead in realising inclusive agribusiness. Close monitoring of ultimate outcomes may impel a strategic focus of the partnership's interventions on the newly regulated nature of the local transportation network. It recognises clustering and crowding in as systemic effects of leadership of the company with an inclusive agribusiness agenda, which, in this case, changed the terms of inclusion of both smallholder farmers and transporters.

5 Discussion and conclusion

The evaluation lens and IP-format developed and used in the 2SCALE programme encouraged partners to discover, qualify, and monitor the systemic effects of working on inclusive agribusiness through the tools presented in this article. The use of theory to delineate a set of ultimate outcomes associated with inclusive agribusiness, i.e. terms of inclusion, terms of access, and leadership in business as unusual, offered partnerships 'antennae' to detect and monitor early and emerging signs of systemic change resulting from their actions. Integrating such directionality in M&E encouraged partners to alter the terms of inclusion of suppliers of food and terms of access of buyers of food.

Methodologically, we propose that combining contribution analysis with Action Research helps to make M&E, embedded in partnering processes, actionable and forward-looking. Including an Action Research component explicitly connected M&E to existing knowledge, and opened conceptual and methodological space to collect evidence on emerging systemic effects of unfolding partnering and problem-solving processes (Burns 2007, 2014). This implies a systematic approach of evaluation that helps to go beyond the traditional focus in impact evaluations to assess average effects for a defined set of target groups (Ton 2021).

The Action Research engages with unfolding partnering processes and refrains from prescribing or inducing actions; instead it is supportive of setting priorities and outlining strategies directed towards inclusive agribusiness (Greenwood and Levin 2007; Vellema 2012). The examples from 2SCALE illustrate how this may lead to re-strategising by partnerships in a practical, iterative, and reflexive way (Apgar, Hernandez and Ton 2020). Moreover, it makes M&E appreciative of the work of partners and partnership facilitators to diffuse the new practices, rules, and interactions beyond the boundaries of the lead business partner and the partnership (Lawrence *et al.* 2002; Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca 2009; Zietsma and McKnight 2009; Vellema and van Wijk 2015). Consequently, monitoring is tasked to capture systemic change as emergent from the choices made by partners navigating complex market environments.

The format for IPs including systemic changes as ultimate outcomes supported partners to use the format as a heuristic device to recognise and appreciate the contribution of their partnership to transformative processes. The examples from 2SCALE show that this way of monitoring the quality of systemic change has the potential to enable partners to adjust, refine, and focus their actions, and to re-strategise by shifting to other target audiences or setting different priorities in the light of systemic change.

Eventually, it may help to reinforce or catalyse processes that are plausibly generating systemic change. However, our experience in 2SCALE also indicates that the magic is not just in the format. It is not self-evident that partnerships allow space for reflexive and systemic-oriented deliberations. In early phases, after brokering partnerships, deliberations concentrated on immediate actions and preferred solutions, and tended to stay away from creatively navigating towards inclusive agribusiness. And, the theoretical nature of delineating signs of systemic change potentially overwhelms users, including data-oriented M&E staff, which therefore requires constant translation of theory to become relevant to practice.

Moreover, the pressure for programme management and the donor to use M&E primarily for accountability reporting in the domain of food and nutrition security made it difficult to keep the monitoring of unfolding and at times whimsical change processes on the agenda. The M&E team had to make continuous efforts to keep the monitoring process as close as possible to the core of the envisioned and context-specific change processes, which was not easy to make commensurate with evaluating the achievement of generic impact targets. Integrating the insights from monitoring early signs of systemic change in carefully facilitated sense-making moments seems to be a productive way to reiterate the programmatic direction towards inclusive agribusiness and to inform deliberations about where and how to intervene in the system.

We conclude that a theory-informed qualification of plausible systemic effects of inclusive agribusiness deepens the understanding of what generates change and contributes to the transformation of food provisioning. The flexible and theory-informed format for the description of and reflection on IPs, central to the approach to M&E presented in this article, fits processes of learning and adaptive management. Reflecting on the contributions of the partnerships' actions to the ultimate outcomes (understood through the following labels: terms of inclusion, terms of access, business leadership) encourages partners in business-driven intervention strategies to envision and appreciate how their interventions and activities were able to reshape the wider system of food provisioning.

Notes

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- 5 For more information on the DCED standard, see DCED (2021).
- 6 Based on detailed reporting of 90+ reported activities and responses of participants (February 2020–April 2021) and data collected during an R&A workshop (26–27 January 2021), and preparatory interviews with the lead business, 2SCALE facilitator, and key informants (business coaches, company owners and managers, farmer representatives, representative county-level Ministry of Agriculture, and commercial bank representative).
- 7 Based on document analysis (e.g. minutes and reports on the partnership) and interviews with 2SCALE staff and the lead business partner after support by 2SCALE ended (source: Jay-Yina (2021)).

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