

# Impact pathways: monitoring and evaluating partnerships for sustainable development

## *Lessons from 2SCALE*

### Key messages

- Impact pathways are a tool to assess partnership performance.
- Insights in performance are essential for both policy improvement as well as adaptive management in the partnership.
- Adaptive management is important to take account of changing environments and circumstances during the project.
- Flexible result frameworks and budgets are required to enable adaptive management.
- Accountability systems need to be adjusted accordingly to accommodate this flexibility.

### Background

Cross-sector partnerships for development often operate in complex and dynamic environments. Although this makes it difficult to determine whether – and how – interventions contribute to results, these insights are needed to inform learning processes, to enable adaptive management, and to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of partnership programmes and policies for development ([van Tulder et al. 2016](#); [Vellema et al. 2017](#)). Many monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tools predominantly focus on assessing performance through end results, so alternative M&E tools are needed to capture the steps through which partnerships achieve – or don't achieve – the desired impact ([Ton et al. 2014](#)).

The 2SCALE programme (<http://2scale.org/>), supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has developed an M&E approach that attempts to explain the process through which partnerships achieve their impact. The approach enables monitoring, learning, and improvements along the way. It is based on guidelines devised by the Donor Committee for Enterprise Development (DCED) to assess the results of private sector engagement in development. The DCED Standard is widely embraced as a valuable approach to studying impact.

In this report we aim to clarify the M&E approach of 2SCALE: the impact pathways approach. The report clarifies what the impact pathways approach offers stakeholders, and the implications of this approach for evaluation commissioners.

*2SCALE brokers and supports business-led partnerships with the aim of combining inclusive development with increased food security. Impact pathways have been defined for more than 80 partnerships in East and West Africa as part of a collaborative action research project with the 2SCALE programme, the [Partnerships Resource Centre \(PrC\)](#) at Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM), and with [Wageningen University & Research \(WUR\)](#). These experiences have led to the development and refinement of a specific way of working that allows partnerships to navigate towards impact in a flexible and reflexive manner.*

## Why are impact pathways needed?

Impact pathways can be used to learn about and to improve partnerships, to make them accountable, and to provide proof of what has been achieved and how.

- They support learning about the partnership's effectiveness in realising development impact.
- They enable partners to navigate the intervention and to assess its speed and direction.
- They offer a strategic management framework focusing on the change process
- They allow partnerships to modify or adjust their intervention logics along the way – while informing and fine-tuning strategic planning.
- They are used for monitoring progress
- They can expose contributions to change processes that can be attributed to the dynamic and complex environments in which partnerships function.

Here are seven different functions and purposes of impact pathways, outlined in more detail:

### 1. Address complexity

Impact pathways help to untangle and address complexity. It's often difficult to predict if and how partnerships will realise their ultimate impact when development interventions, especially those including a variety of cross-sector partners, are often complex and multi-faceted. Monitoring progress is essential for assessing whether a partnership is on track or whether adjustments are needed.

### 2. Prioritise actions

They help to prioritise actions. By explicating the aim and expected process of a partnership programme towards that aim, impact pathways support partners in identifying activities that are essential for reaching their ambitions, so they help to build a set of interventions and prioritise activities. Simultaneously, they help to uncover flawed assumptions about change processes so that partners can disregard activities that do not contribute to the desired change.

### 3. Facilitate replicability

They facilitate replicability of interventions. They explicate what works, where, why and under what conditions, so help to show whether and how successful interventions can be replicated in other contexts. This facilitates processes of upscaling or scaling out interventions, taking into account the particularities and context of an intervention.

#### 4. Incorporate tailor-made approaches

While they facilitate replicability, they also help to incorporate tailor-made approaches. Taking an impact pathways approach recognises that each partnership is unique and therefore incorporates theories of change tailored to its specific ambitions, change processes and conditions. Working with impact pathways as a way of monitoring the actions and outcomes of partnerships enables facilitators to support partners when they set their priorities and to detect the span of influence of the partnership; they can recognise risks and tensions that may adversely affect the change process managed by the partnership.

#### 5. Explicate assumptions and priorities

By encouraging partners to contemplate and discuss impact pathways, implicit knowledge and values can become explicit. Impact pathways help to change unconscious assumptions into conscious knowledge and skills; they help to explicate assumptions and priorities to inform the discussion of prioritising actions that are likely to contribute to planned change processes.

#### 6. Enable learning and adaptive management

Impact pathways are a useful tool for learning and adaptive management. They enable interventions to be tracked so that 'what works and what doesn't' becomes clear. Timely and reiterated insights into a partnership's progress can inform decisions about where to focus the partnership's resources. Reflecting on progress allows partnerships to refine, revise or replace impact pathways along the way. In this way, impact pathways support adaptive management: this is how partnerships navigate complex environments with all kinds of risks and tensions, learn from experience, and are likely to discover new opportunities or partners.

#### 7. Facilitate comparison

Impact pathways offer opportunities to compare interventions, thereby enabling learning processes across partnerships. Explicating the type of change process helps to detect similarities and differences in mechanisms and processes, and so facilitates comparisons while helping to gather insights and knowledge that might be useful in other settings.

Impact pathways have different values for different roles and positions. This is illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Benefits of impact pathways for different stakeholders	
Stakeholders	Benefits
Donors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accountability purposes</li> <li>• Monitoring the progress of change process and steering towards objectives</li> <li>• Helping partners to understand the possibilities for replicating successful interventions in other contexts.</li> </ul>
Partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helping to prioritise and explicate interrelated strategic routes to key development outcomes, so helping to determine the steps required for achieving inclusive development identified by partners (including outcomes outlined in the programme-level results framework)</li> <li>• Enabling the progress of key development outcomes to be tracked, and steering where necessary, making use of 'adaptive management'</li> <li>• Enabling partners to carefully detect their own and the partnership's span of influence and thus to recognise where building new alignments or including other stakeholders makes a difference.</li> </ul>
Monitoring and evaluation staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helping to track progress</li> <li>• Monitoring for continuous assessment of achievements, risks and tensions gives guidance to strategic management and decision-making during the process of incubating inclusive business and development.</li> </ul>

### How to work with impact pathways

When you want to create a logical storyline that describes how project activities and outputs are expected to – and do in fact – contribute to partnership goals, an impact pathway can help. The way this tool works is anchored in the logic of theory-based evaluations: impact pathways provide a simple depiction of the causal processes that record and explain exactly what happens during an intervention. In 2SCALE, participation and attribution are the starting principles for creating an impact pathway.

First, partners use their shared strategic ambition and envisioned change process to create an impact pathway. They can amend it throughout the process according to any new insights, the results of pilot schemes, opportunities that arise, or any unanticipated changes in the environment in which the process is implemented. Partners hold regular sessions to review the progress of their impact pathways and the progress of the partnership compared to their projection.

When partners self-report on their progress it contributes to learning and reflection within the partnership; such a strong 'culture of learning' within each partnership is essential.

Second, the underlying logic of the impact pathways format is based on a decreasing degree of attribution. Partnerships seek to change the behaviour of individuals and organisations, which in turn is supposed to produce more structural changes. Each intervention starts with providing goods or services. Target audiences are expected to receive the intervention positively and improve their capacities as a result. The subsequent changes in the practices of target audiences should generate more structural and system-level changes. In turn, these set in motion processes that result in the development impact.

An impact pathway thus acknowledges various degrees of attribution. It moves from changes highly attributable to the actions and activities of the partnerships, gradually towards changes that also entail action and activities of others and/or external influences. Hence, a partnership's impact pathway clarifies what it actually influenced and what reasonable contribution it made to a more complex process of transformation. The complexity involved in realizing development impact means that these can rarely be attributed to a single factor, intervention or actor. Figure 1 provides two examples of impact pathways.

### Two examples of Impact Pathways for one partnership

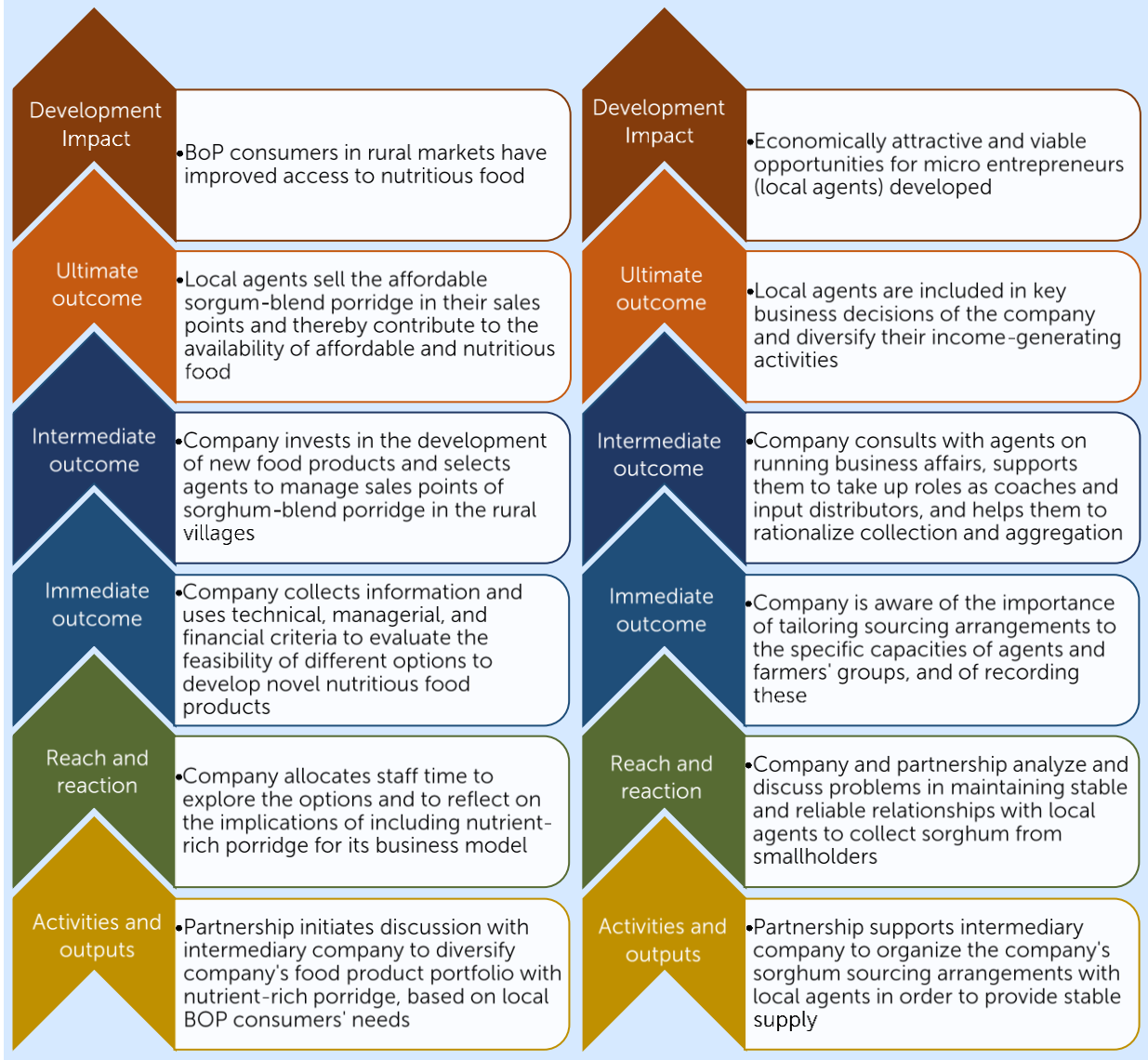
To illustrate this approach and based on our extensive experience of drafting impact pathways in the 2SCALE programme, we present two impact pathways for a fictional partnership.

Both are part of a programme that brokers and supports business-led partnerships to combine inclusive development with increased food security. This programme aims to serve consumers at the Base of the Pyramid (BOP) by supplying food products to end-user markets, while supporting and including small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and farmer groups in value chains.

The fictional partnership in this example is centred on an SME. It is an intermediary company focusing on the sourcing and processing of sorghum in rural East Africa. The company operates in an environment characterised by high levels of malnutrition; very few children aged 6-23 months get the minimum acceptable diet. The aim of this partnership is to develop a nutritious food product and make it available to those consumers who need it most.

The partnership focuses on sourcing, product development, and marketing and distribution of sorghum to BOP markets, as shown in the impact pathways examples in Figure 1. Local sourcing needs to become more inclusive and efficient. Before the partnership, the quality and quantity of sorghum purchased from farmers was unreliable; buyers would compete to buy from farmers, and commodity prices were erratic.

Figure 1. Impact pathways examples





## Implications for monitoring and evaluation

The Netherlands' Ministry of Foreign Affairs channels most of its private sector development support through cross-sector partnerships. Understanding whether, how, and under which conditions these partnerships manage to realise an impact supports the Ministry in accounting for the use of resources. Impact pathways are a tool to help prioritise ongoing and future initiatives and modalities, and support policy improvement.

This report has illustrated the use and value of impact pathways as a tool to monitor and evaluate complex partnership interventions. This approach necessitates a move away from a unilateral focus on end results, and instead focuses on capturing processes so that partnerships can incorporate lessons and adjust the steering along the way. This shift in practice inevitably requires adjustments to accountability systems and practices – specifically, it makes little sense to hold partnerships to account for their pre-defined activities and deliverables when the path to impact is uncertain from the onset. Hence, there is a growing need for flexible results frameworks and budgets to allow partnership programmes the flexibility to adjust their approach if needed. Accountability frameworks need to be adapted accordingly to facilitate and support approaches that are viable, according to the Donor Committee for Enterprise Development (DCED) for capturing partnerships' results and progress.

This document is written by Marijn Faling, Sietze Vellema and Greetje Schouten, September 2020. For more information, visit the [2SCALE website](#) or email [faling@rsm.nl](mailto:faling@rsm.nl).

## References

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