**Notes, TOPS M&E Task Force Meeting June 2, 2016**

**Participants**

* Jose “TD” Thekkiniath, CRS/ Nairobi
* Marcel Janssen, Mercy Corps
* Diana Stukel, FANTA
* Harry “Hap” Carr, CRS
* Kristi Pearson, World Vision
* Lauren Jessup, TOPS
* Laurie Starr, TOPS

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| **AGENDA** |  |
| **Introductions**  | 9:00 |
| **Discussion: What are best practices in linking the project theory of change to M&E systems?*** **Experiences thus far.**
* **Define what needs to be linked?**
* **What needs to be in place to link?**
* **Constraints and enablers**
* **Gaps in existing guidance to linking project ToC to M&E system.**
 | 9:05 – 9:30 |
| **How can the ME TF contribute to documenting and disseminating best practices in linking the project theory of change to M&E systems?**  | 9:30 – 9:40 |
| **Discussion: What are the M&E implications of Refine and Implement?*** **Elements of M&E in R&I that we already do**
* **How, if at all, will R&I change our current processes?**
* **Any new M&E requirements?**
* **How do M&E teams prepare for this new program design?**
* **Concerns/ opportunities?**
* **What is still unclear?**
 | 9:40-10:10 |
| **Laurie: Update on forthcoming short ME capacity development sessions.**  | 10:10-10:20 |
| **Close**  |  |

Notes are not verbatim. Due to the back and forth between those speaking over the phone and those typing in the chat box, some of the discussion has been re-ordered to allow for a more logical flow of dialogue.

**Discussion: What are best practices in linking the project theory of change to M&E systems?**

All participants have gone through the process of creating a ToC for a FFP application.

Laurie: How many believe your project ToC is well-linked to the M&E system?

HAP: Good project design system, but unsure if it improves much in M&E. Indicators are really the only bridge.

Diana: one big disconnect in the FFP context (recognizing the process of linking TOC to M&E systems and program implementation is in its infancy) is that projects are asked to submit proposals and flesh out full project proposal and a short theory of change, and after award they convene for M&E workshops, co-assisted by FANTA, to map out/ dissect/ reconstruct the theory of change. Recognition that this is a backwards way to do things. Ideally, projects should do formative research before building project implementation and TOC. What is positive about Refine & Implement process is that it will accord projects the ability to do things in the right sequence---building TOC [based on formative research] and design project implementation around the TOC. Does this resonate?

Laurie: Yes, Refine and Implement in Year 1 will offer a great opportunity [ to adjust a project TOC], but [ FFP] Dina has been very clear that when PVOS submit application, it must be include a sound TOC, so it can’t be a poorly defined concept. We need to be very clear that [ R & I] doesn’t get us off the hook. We still need to do a lot of the research beforehand to inform the application [and build a solid TOC]. A lot of the questions that come up when trying to make causal linkages, and you realize you don’t have all the evidence, those are the kind of questions that can be answered in Year 1 of R &I.

HAP: The evidence can be answered in Year 1?

Laurie: Yes, hopefully. The evidence to support the lower-level outcomes when you are trying to understand what will get the upper gears of the TOC spinning. I always work from a problem tree. Don’t know how anyone can create a TOC without a problem tree---as you find out about new issues, you’ve got to be able to insert them in the mirror image—the conjoined twin.

Kristi: Agree with Diana. Went through the process with the recent Bangladesh award. The people who put together the proposals are an entirely different team than those running the project, so it was helpful to re-do the whole [ToC] and look at it after the award, with the people who would be moving the project forward. I worked on proposals before [the ToC] requirement was in place. We always had to have a TOC, but it wasn’t laid out as specifically and critically as it is now. So when we were putting the project together, we were always trying to fit that framework into the TOC. Trying to separate that was a good exercise at the most recent M&E workshop. Before I always wanted to make sure the TOC looked similar to our framework, so that our M&E system would match up, but that is not what they wanted us to do in that exercise.

*n.b - TOC should define the project design, not vice versa.*

Laurie: I may have a biased view of how NGOs create their TOCs. I’ve participated in a number of design workshops, and folks implementing the project have always been involved in the design process. Maybe that is outside the norm. Right there is something that we need to push for [as a best practice]. People who are implementing will certainly be involved in revising the TOC in YR 1 of Refine and Implement, but if they are not involved in the workshop to create the TOC, or at the very least are not called upon to vet the TOC, the process is inefficient.

Agreement.

HAP: We try to get potential COPs involved in the process, but typically CRS process is similar to what Kristi described. We’ve had to set up something to transition projects, even those without a TOC, where a first step is to have the team that is going to implement the project review and refine the design--asking what does this all mean, why is it designed like this, etc.

**What needs to be linked between the project TOC and the M &E system?**

Diana: In terms of best practices - I think it is important to have at least one indicator at every level/ node. Another issue that needs to be well thought out is data collection systems -- they may need to be different for different purposes (e.g., MCHN, Ag, Resilience). Some may require beneficiary-based surveys, for others routine monitoring may suffice.

Kristi: Assumptions.

Laurie: Seeing more assumptions crop up in TOC diagrams. FFP requests this. Early TOPS/TANGO guidance had you creating a matrix where you could provide a lot of detail based on the belief that it doesn’t all fit in the conceptual model. We now know we must put some of those assumptions in the graphic. I’m wondering how well are those assumptions linked to your M&E system? They are so critical—what is the process throughout the project life for checking to see if the assumptions still hold? I believe this is a gap.

Hap: The problem CRS is having is [confusion surrounding different types of assumptions]. First off, the definition of assumptions has changed over time. It’s wonderful to talk about contextual factors/ assumptions. Then there is “rationale” which I really don’t understand. I’m assuming that means internal hypotheses to the project. If you’re going to say A leads to B, then you’re making some assumptions about what has to happen for A to lead to B. But our teams aren’t understanding it that way. There is confusion around rationales and contextual assumptions. Also what do you need to be checking? That is still missing. The first hurdle is understanding them, the second is identifying them, we haven’t gotten to the point yet of checking to see if the assumptions still hold. The next thing would be where to put indicators for assumptions if they are identified.

Laurie: Checking assumptions will not be a part of your IPTT. This is an internal monitoring process

Diana: I agree with Hap that there is great confusion surrounding the different types of assumptions. Hopefully the FFP [M&E] Policy and Guidance document that will be issued soon will help to clarify.

T D JOSE, CRS: The new FFP DFAP technical reference differentiate between ToC rationale (logic and evidence) and assumptions (contextual and conditions). One challenge is that you find logical causation, but its hard to find strong/quality evidence for the causal logic plausibility.

Laurie: *referencing TOC slide of WV Bangladesh, a TOC model that FFP has accepted.* FFP has been very clear in regard to their TOC models, that they are not looking for assumptions such as “men and women are willing to take investment risk”. To many this would appear to be out of a project’s control, but FFP premise is that [factors that the project seeks to influence should not be considered assumptions]. We’re looking for the broader things (i.e., low potential for conflict or minimum price volatility). You may find that other TOC literature and guidance (including guidance referenced in the Technical Chapters and M&E Policy and Guidance Document) may or may not agree with this definition of assumptions, but for FFP-funded programs you should use their definition. Seems like there is an opportunity to have a smaller session to help PVOS clarify what are and are not assumptions. This is an area where we need more guidance.

Diana: Another issue that needs to be well thought out is data collection systems - they may need to be different for different purposes (e.g., MCHN, Ag, Resilience). Some may require beneficiary-based surveys(BBS), for others routine monitoring may suffice. One size does not fit all. Say you’ve got hundreds of thousands of beneficiaries on the ag. side, and you want to do a BBS because routine monitoring would be onerous to collect complex indicators like gross margins, etc. So for the ag. purpose a BBS may be worthwhile for some indicators. But on the MCHN side, you may have slightly different set of beneficiaries, so the same survey isn’t going to serve your purpose, in terms of data collection. But also, the indicators you need to collect may be easily collected through routine monitoring . One data collection system does not serve all project purposes because beneficiary pool may be quite different, and the indicators you need to collect data for may be best-suited to be collected through one system vs. another.

Marcel: FFP-M&E is getting more and more critical regarding data collection. Also, the ToC tends to increase the number of indicators, in addition to the huge amount of FFP indicators.

HAP: The TOC is linked to the logframe, so the logframe tells you what indicators you really have to have. FFP says there is a limitation on what indicators go in there. So they’re in there, but they are the standard indicators that FFP says we have to address. So that’s what goes into the proposal, other indicators come later on. Refine and Implement will join these, because there is more time to look for evidence, figure out what we need, even get indicators for the assumptions. As you flesh out through the first year, you already know what you have to find evidence for, and you also learn what indicators you need to measure those things. So [outside of R&I] the TOC as you have to apply it in a proposal ---there aren’t many indicators that need to be in the proposal and they are high-level indicators. Most of them come out of the third party macro baseline data gathering (PBS). There is potential for linking [TOC to ME system] but I don’t think if you’re using TOC in proposals it lets you take all that potential, or gives you enough time to develop it. In agreement with TD-- if you’re looking into causal relationships, the evidence requirements can be problematic. We are very conscious of the need for and emphasis on evidence but we’re still stuck with the construct where proposals are prepared by people who are not necessarily technically-knowledgeable and who may not be involved in implementing the project. So that means whatever prior studies or assessments you have to do, you need time to do those before the proposal is written in order to gather sufficient evidence to put in the proposal.

Marcel: Also, the ToC tends to increase the number of indicators, in addition to the huge amount of FFP indicators.

Kristi: [WV] has not found this to be true. Maybe we’re looking at it differently. When/ where are you finding extra indicators?

Marcel: It depends on your intervention models and the ToC identifies more clearly where you need indicators.

Laurie: Agreed. # of indicators will depend on what shakes out in your TOC. There is a potential for increasing # of indicators, depending on what you want to monitor, but is not an absolute.

Marcel: For example resilience, there are no standard FFP indicators [so they need to be added] , but you still need to measure FFP indicators that may not be that applicable for your program.

Laurie: Yes, MC Nepal is a good example. Where the DFAP must measure MCHN indicators even though there is no MCHN component in the program. MC Pahal DFAP (Nepal) is a very interesting case…good example of TOC thinking and including other actors in the model. MC Pahal is situated in the same region as the SC Suaahara project which implements all MCHN elements. MC works on ag and resilience, very little MCHN efforts, with exception of nutrition messaging, yet MC is also responsible for measuring the FFP MCHN indicators.

T D JOSE, CRS: another point to add is linking "evidence gaps" in the ToC to M&E system to fill these evidence gaps.

Marcel: Agreed.

Laurie: This has huge potential for linking the TOC to ME systems. You must put a sound TOC forth in your DFAP application. We know from experience, even when we spend a couple of months on TOC development, we still have evidence gaps. As we shift into R&I, those are the kinds of questions where the TOC can help you identify what information does your ME system need to collect, whether through qualitative research, process interviews, surveys etc.

A critical piece of linking TOC to ME is a stakeholder analyses. Are PVOS conducting thorough stakeholder analyses?

Hap: [CRS] does stakeholder analyses at various stages, but not sure if they always zero in on the assumptions and evidence gaps. Again, time is a constraint.

Kristi: [WV] does them in the pre-positioning stage and again during program design. And another exercise at the start-up workshop. We make sure we are adding stakeholders at critical points of our ME system to make sure we’re collecting data.

Group Agreement.

Laurie: This is good, but the information has to be linked to the TOC. This is one area that has been difficult for PVOS. There is a gap in guidance. FFP highlighted in a PAC meeting recently that few TOCs are sufficiently bringing the other actors into the model. *Demonstrates where actions of other stakeholders appear in WV Bangladesh model.* Note in the model, whenever we see the shapes that represent the actions of other actors, the TOC does not have to show all the preconditions leading up to that action or show any causal logic below. But these are main points to bring up in the TOC narrative. And these are outcomes that can become an assumption [in the logframe], because we assume [the other actors] will continue to do their job.

Hap: If you’ve identified what other actors are doing, next step is to create indicators to determine whether other actors are achieving predicted results that are necessary to our TOC. Now you’ve got additional indicators that you have to gather information for. Then you have to track those indicators. So it isn’t just gathering the data, but looking at how the data influences your theory of change. What do we do when we identify that other actors are not doing the things we assumed they would do---those things we expected would feed into our project and not kill it? Need to refine the TOC. We’ve been told this TOC revision should be an annual process. Agree with that. A conscious annual process of revising the TOC according to what the data are telling you about the assumptions and evidence that you thought was accurate, but is not, is important and purposeful and ensures the TOC doesn’t fall out of the M&E system.

TD: Critical linkage between TOC and ME systems: Need to conduct more data *analysis* to test TOC causation using inferential statistics, not just by descriptive statistics complemented with qualitative research. Typically, ME systems are just testing whether we met targets or not, but that is not sufficient to test the logic in the TOC. Inferential data analysis has not been requirement before. Now in ARR, we must show that causal logic is working in the TOC, so we will require more data analysis.

Marcel: Need to link TOC to DIP.

Laurie: Great point. TOC really highlights the most effective sequencing for activities. So often we have people starting up at the top of the logic model trying to implement activities [related to higher-level outcomes] when logic model clearly shows the focus should first be on lower-level outcomes.

Hap: As I understand [FFP] instructions, we are supposed to talk about what happens at purpose level, sub-purpose level, intermediate outcomes level (e.g., what do we assume about it, what evidence we have, etc.) Then you go to output level. In TOCs, there is a big distance between a sub-purpose and an IO, and particularly between the IO and the output. Huge logical distance. There was a time when TOC allowed us to add another layer…something like immediate outcome or just outcome. If we could include a lower-level outcome it decreases distance between the logical steps between intermediate outcome and output, makes it easier to define.

Laurie: This is an opportunity to clarify the guidance. There is no restriction on including lower-level outcomes. Include them. FFP wants detail and wants to see the good causal logic. Things need to be clear. On the overview page that shows the entire TOC, some of those layers may need to be cut out. But every single purpose should have its own detailed diagram, and this is where you can add the lower-level outcomes and dig into detail. The other place to provide detail is in the TOC narrative.

Hap: Concern that TOC narrative can be only 1 page, not enough room for detail. At least people interpret it this way to keep page limit down.

Group is not aware of this. Will look into guidance and confirm. Most believe that TOC narrative can be many pages, although summary in Technical Proposal, project design section, may be shortened to 1 page.

Laurie: Gap in guidance identified. Do know that the narrative is not supposed to summarize what is already obvious in your graphic model. Use the narrative to fill in the blanks. If reader/ user may have trouble understanding a causal link, you should add detail in the narrative. Discuss on what basis you are making assumptions, etc.

Group decides to move on to Refine and Implement. We have a good foundation for next TF meeting so we can continue to think about what needs to be in place to ensure TOC is integrated in ME system, constraints and enablers to solid linkages, and specific ways METF can contribute to documenting and disseminating best practices.

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| **Rough start to be fleshed out in future ME TF meetings.** |
| **What needs to be linked between TOC and M&E systems** | **How? What needs to be in place…**  | **Constraints/ Enablers**  |
| Indicators –linked to IPTT | One indicator at every level of TOC |  |
| Assumptions  | M&E system check to see that assumptions still hold.  |  |
| Evidence gaps | Use TOC to help identify evidence gaps-- the information ME system will need to collect  |  |
| Logframe  |  |  |
| Stakeholder analyses  | Feed information from Stakeholder Analysis into TOC development. Conduct periodic M&E check to see that the stakeholder conditions and resources that your assumptions rest on are still in place.  | Staff time/ resources limit thoroughness |
| Formative research – community consultations / barrier analysis  | See how data feeds into TOC. Annual review of ToC. More data *analysis* to test TOC causation using inferential statistics, not just by descriptive statistics complemented with qualitative research.  |  |
| DIP  | Use TOC as tool to determine most efficient sequencing of activities.  |  |
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**Best practices to ensure TOC and M&E systems are well-linked (unfinished)**

* Invest in formative research months before a proposal is due to be able to inform the development of the TOC and to provide the proposal writers with sufficient evidence to make a convincing case.
* Involve implementing staff in initial design process/ creation of TOC.
* Ensure differing data collection systems for different project purposes.
* More data *analysis* to test TOC causation using inferential statistics, not just by descriptive statistics complemented with qualitative research
* Use TOC to help identify evidence gaps
* Feed information from Stakeholder Analysis into TOC development. Conduct periodic M&E check to see that the stakeholder conditions and resources that your assumptions rest on are still in place.
* Conduct a conscious annual review of the TOC based on collected data.
* Use TOC to develop efficient sequencing for the DIP.

**Discussion: What are the M&E implications of Refine and Implement?**

*Using USAID FY 16 Refine and Implement slides as reference*

Laurie: The R&E stakeholder consultation notes showed concerns about “extra assessments”? Do you view R&I as requiring extra assessments / more work on the part of the M&E team?

Kristi: Think we’re doing [what R&I requires] already. Doesn’t seem like extra work. Everything on the slides we’re currently doing for Bangladesh within the start-up period.

Marcel: Agree- material on slides is sort of standard.

Hap: There is a lot of analysis that has to go into R&I. That is mainly what YR 1 is about. There are a lot of things that still need to be studied and the evidence gathered to understand linkages that may mean changes to the TOC. Attended TOPS first TOC workshop—main point was that TOC is based on knowledge—studies, research, understanding what has worked and what hasn’t worked. Lots of effort needs to be put into the studies before you’ve covered all the bases in the program design. R&I YR 1 is about doing more studies.

It is different from what we already do because we’re going to be doing it hand and hand with FFP. We’re going to be doing it over a year. The final design of the project is going to be the result of that. There is conscious, purposeful analysis that needs to be done. And it’s paid for.

Laurie: Checking in with you because my interpretation of the notes from the stakeholder consultation on R&I was that PVOs were very worried that R&I was adding a lot more work for them. I see R&I as a huge benefit. These are assessments you already do, or should be doing--they should be standard practice, and now you’ve got someone to help you do and pay for it and you’ve got an extra year to refine the program design without worrying about implementation.

TD: We are already doing these assessments but we are not doing them in a structured way prior to the submission of the proposal. These assessments require a lot of time and money and we don’t have that money prior to the award. It’s a good approach—we will have sufficient time to do all the research to refine the design after the award, and it’s paid for by FFP.

Laurie: Getting back to needing a solid TOC for the application--R&I doesn’t relieve you from doing this type of research prior to the application. My concern is that sometimes people are interpreting R&I as a reason to not do any research to inform the application. You need to do this type of research to inform the proposal, and then do more of it after the award [to fill gaps]. It is a budget constraint [to carry out research prior to award], but that is part of the game.

Hap: Opportunity is huge. Cites DFAP in Guatemala as example. It should have had a WASH element. It wasn’t in the RFA, wasn’t proposed by program and FFP didn’t ask for it in the negotiations. In the first 1.5 years, noticed WASH was missing. That’s what YR 1 of R&I will help you correct.

Marcel: Similar situation for MC in PROCOMIDA [also Guatemala].

Hap: TD accurately stated that some research needed to test various hypotheses is too costly to carry out prior to submitting the application. [Guatemala] is a good example of this. We said in our proposal that we have evidence at a high level that A should lead to B, but we didn’t know the specific contextual circumstances. More qualitative research was needed. Many organizations may not fund qualitative research or have the time to carry it out. During negotiations, FFP may change the TOC enough that you need that first year to do more studies.

Group agreement: R & I is viewed as huge opportunity. Few concerns.

Hap: One concern. FFP and PVOs are doing YR together, that’s great. But what happens if we disagree on how a project moves forward. We all want to get to the same place. Engagement needs to be close, timely and in good faith.

Marcel: One concern in practice is the synergies. This is always something we all like and talk about, but in the field it's not always that easy. And FFP or the Mission can either function as a catalyst or a stumbling block.

Laurie: Gets down to relationships. We know that there are differences in the personalities of various AORs, CBOs, other Mission and HQ staff. etc. Next ME TF meeting we can talk about how to foment that relationship with FFP staff that allows for more predictability in response.

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| **Rough start to be fleshed out in future ME TF meetings.** |

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| **lements of M&E in Refine and Implement** **that we are already do**  | **How will R&I change our current processes?**  | **Concerns** | **Opportunities** |
| Geographic targeting @ community level  | No major change. Minor change in how you phase in and layer activities into your targets.  |  |  |
| Community consultations/ validation of assumptions  | Will put more focus on refining and validating assumptions and use these to refine the TOC | None  | May have sufficient information to negotiate with FFP on changes to geographical area.  |
| Institutional analysis |  |  |  |
| Formative research/ barrier analysis |  |  |  |
| Gender analysis |  |  |  |
| Value chain analysisMarket analysis |  |  |  |
| IEE: Initial Environment Examination |  |  |  |
| Shock/ stressor analysis  |  |  |  |
| Data collection for lower-level outcomes( annual monitoring)  |  |  |  |

**Wrap up**

Laurie: New effort of TOPS M&E team—short capacity development sessions. In-person and webinars. Opportunity to drill down on very specific weak spots vs. a broad 5-day or 3-day training. Hope people can make time for them because they are short and convenient. We’ll host them at several times of day to accommodate various continents. Examples: How do you correctly calculate the CSI? What questions should be standards in qualitative research focused on food security? Areas that PVO staff continue to struggle with despite published guidance. What has to be included in your TOC narrative? Currently the source for determining training topics is FFP. Would be great to have the ME TF contribute to the list. Areas you know that field teams find challenging. Hope to kick off the sessions in late summer. We may need to call on ME TF for expertise/ participation in the trainings.

TD: one area for capacity development is standard protocols for periodically testing ToC.

Hap: TOPS TF used to put on trainings for field participants once a year. Haven’t done that in a couple of years, but could we start up again?

Laurie: TOPS TF was really a thriving body a few years ago. So much technical skill within the TF, it would be nice to explore ways to pull that skill together and share it! The opportunity for all the agencies to come together and pool your knowledge is amazing. TOPS is such a good mechanism for that.

**Next meeting:** will be scheduled shortly after the DFAP submissions. Perhaps 3 weeks. Will use today’s progress as the foundation.

Group agrees that we need to meet more often. Once a month or once per quarter.

Will work toward setting a schedule that people can count on (e.g., last Thursday of the month) acknowledging that not everyone is going to make it every time. TOPS will provide notes and recordings so if you miss a meeting you know what went on.

Hap: Something that worked before was when there were issues like how FFP was going to adapt evaluation policy or required FFP indicators and how they were folded into F indicators and FFP indicators—issues that are fundamental for ME implementers to understand—there was a lot of TF participation and consultation around these issues.

Laurie: Two documents I’m aware of that are out for public review are the APS and the informed consent document. If there are others out there that the TF wants to review as a group, let me know.

Hap/ TD: What is status of M&E guidance and policy draft?

Laurie: According to Arif, consider the draft policy until it is finalized.

Hap: There are still chapters missing…e.g., final evaluation.

**Group agreement: Desire to go over Draft policy and guidance for M&E, and reporting for DFAPS. TF to send Laurie discussion points and areas of concern**