# Using theory to help understand policy change processes

Boru Douthwaite

Selkie.ie

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# Introduction

- To present takeaways from evaluations of four policy-related outcomes generated by the CGIAR Research Program on Roots, Tubers and Bananas (approx. $200 million over nine years)

- That may have relevance to DESiRA Projects

- Based on a paper published in Research Evaluation

OXFORD

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

**Boru Douthwaite** (iD) [1,2,*], **Claudio Proietti** (iD) [3], **Vivian Polar**[2], **Graham Thiele**[2]

[1]Selkie Consulting Ltd., Cushalogurt, Kilmeena, Westport, Co. Mayo, Ireland
[2]CGIAR Research Program on Roots, Tubers and Bananas (RTB), led by the International Potato Center (CIP), Av. La Molina 1895, Distrito de La Molina, Lima 12, Peru
[3]Center for International Cooperation in Agricultural Research for Development (CIRAD), Bâtiment 1, 389 Av. Agropolis, 34980 Montferrier-sur-Lez, France

*Corresponding author. Email: bdouthwaite@gmail.com.

## 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

# The four policy outcomes identified for evaluation – significant progress made towards:

- Continental declaration by the African Union in support of biofortification

- Cassava seed certification system implemented by the national government in Tanzania and Rwanda (one evaluation for each country)

- A coordinated national-level response to control Purple Top in potatoes

**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 | 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 |

# Takeaway 1: Policy-related outcomes are broader than you might think

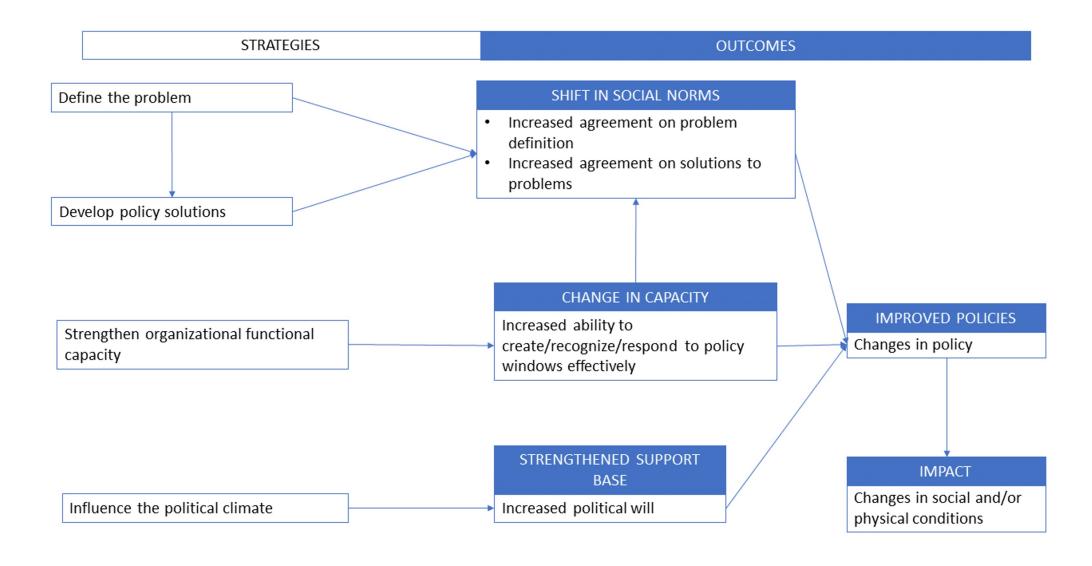- Changes in laws and regulations governing economic incentives in agriculture or natural resource management;

- Creation of institutions;

- Changes in government investment priorities and budget allocations;

- Innovations to the operations and management for government agencies and programs;

- International treaties, declarations, or agreements among parties

  reached at major policy conferences.

Renkow (2018, p. 2)

# Takeaway 2: Policy-oriented outcomes emerge from outcome trajectories

- Complex adaptive systems (CAS) theory (Axelrod & Cohen 1999) suggests that "*policy-related outcomes emerge from a patterned set of interactions between actors, strategies, technology, knowledge and institutions that evolve over time*"

- We define the patterned and evolving set of interactions an 'outcome trajectory'

# Takeaway 3: Policy windows theory helps understand and describe the dynamics at play within outcome trajectories

# Policy Window theory



| STRATEGIES | OUTCOMES |
|---|---|

**Define the problem** → 

**Develop policy solutions** →

**SHIFT IN SOCIAL NORMS**
- Increased agreement on problem definition
- Increased agreement on solutions to problems

**Strengthen organizational functional capacity** →

**CHANGE IN CAPACITY**
Increased ability to create/recognize/respond to policy windows effectively

**Influence the political climate** →

**STRENGTHENED SUPPORT BASE**
Increased political will

**IMPROVED POLICIES**
Changes in policy

**IMPACT**
Changes in social and/or physical conditions

Stachowiak, S. (2013). Pathways for change: 10 theories to inform advocacy and policy change efforts. Washington: Center for Evaluation Innovation

# Takeaway 4: Story-writing brings together the two theoretical perspectives

- The evaluator constructs a timeline of the outcome trajectory (a CAS) and then explains in writing the dynamics that have been playing out in the outcome trajectory, using Policy Window theory to frame the enquiry
  - Writing explanations helps identify and explain causal connections and causal logic
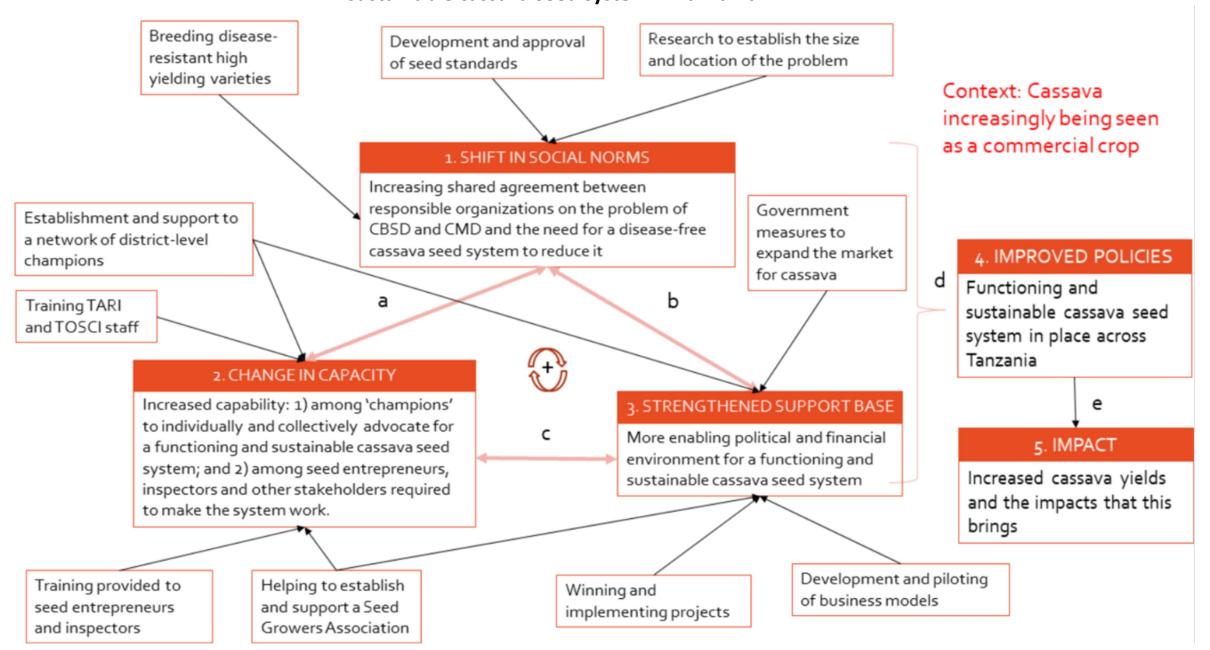
# Some of what Policy Window theory suggested we looked for in the Tanzania evaluation

- Who worked on researching and framing the problem over time (e.g., losses due to cassava viral diseases)
- Who worked on researching and developing solutions
- Who built capacity in how to employ the solutions (and in so doing showing they are practical)
- Who communicated about cassava viral disease problems and solutions
- Who built and used capacity to generate and/or take advantage of policy windows, to champion
- Who built or thwarted institutional support for the policy change

# Takeaway 5

- The story and Policy Window theory together form the basis of a theory of change (ToC)
- The ToC describes the program contribution to the outcome trajectory
  - May include actions taken by other actors as well as the project/program being evaluated

Ex post theory of change describing how RTB and other actors contributed to setting up a functioning and sustainable cassava seed system in Tanzania

Build a ToC

Breeding disease-resistant high yielding varieties

Development and approval of seed standards

Research to establish the size and location of the problem

Context: Cassava increasingly being seen as a commercial crop

**1. SHIFT IN SOCIAL NORMS**

Increasing shared agreement between responsible organizations on the problem of CBSD and CMD and the need for a disease-free cassava seed system to reduce it

Establishment and support to a network of district-level champions

Training TARI and TOSCI staff

Government measures to expand the market for cassava

**4. IMPROVED POLICIES**

Functioning and sustainable cassava seed system in place across Tanzania

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b

d

**2. CHANGE IN CAPACITY**

Increased capability: 1) among 'champions' to individually and collectively advocate for a functioning and sustainable cassava seed system; and 2) among seed entrepreneurs, inspectors and other stakeholders required to make the system work.

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c

**3. STRENGTHENED SUPPORT BASE**

More enabling political and financial environment for a functioning and sustainable cassava seed system

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**5. IMPACT**

Increased cassava yields and the impacts that this brings

Training provided to seed entrepreneurs and inspectors

Helping to establish and support a Seed Growers Association

Winning and implementing projects

Development and piloting of business models

# Takeaway 6: Finding relating to advocacy derived from transversal learning

- Effective advocacy strategies depend upon the proximity in network terms between researchers on one hand, and policy decision-makers on the other
  - When separation is large, e.g., when attempting to influence the African Union Secretariat, then a formal advocacy strategy is appropriate
  - When small, an informal strategy is more appropriate, e.g. Tanzania where a coalition of CGIAR and national-level researchers can interact directly with policy makers
    - Not seen as advocacy at all

# Takeaway 7: Finding relating to donors

- The importance of continued funding across several project cycles
    - BMGF has been good in this respect
- That donors themselves influence the enabling environment at the highest levels by funding think-tanks and global movements, e.g., support for the biofortification declaration from:
    - DfID's support to the Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition
        - Rhoda Peace Tumusiime, the AU Commissioner for the Department of Rural Economy and Agriculture (DREA), and Akinwumi Adesina, President of the AfDB were members
- Donors can balance national and global priorities

# Conclusions

- Many program outcomes are 'policy-oriented' according definition used in the paper
- Policy Window theory proved a useful framework for understanding the outcome trajectories from which policy-oriented outcomes emerge. The framework can help with transversal learning
- DESiRA projects might usefully consider identifying their own emerging significant outcomes and outcome trajectories that are generating them
    - Look for where DESiRA projects are starting to influence national-level policies that relate to agricultural innovation systems and describe the respective outcome trajectories giving rise to these policy changes