

# Info Note

## Lessons from evaluation of CCAFS outcomes to improve outcome delivery and reporting

*Lessons learned from 2016-2019 outcome case evaluations*

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DECEMBER 2020

### Key messages

- Continuous project outcome case evaluation can help to improve on the awareness and quality of the reporting. Overall, scores are improving over the years; cases with very low scores decreased from 2016 to 2019, while the proportion of cases with medium scores and above increased.
- Encouraging projects to report on outcome cases helps with building a large body of evidence that can form the basis for future evaluations and for developing credible contribution claims for CCAFS' work, as well as demonstrating value for money to investors.
- Working with external evaluators is enriching and contributes valuable inputs for improvements.
- Well-evidenced and quality outcome cases are a credible tool for sharing with stakeholders and partners, including funders to demonstrate accountability.

Every year, CGIAR Research Programs develop Outcome Impact Case Reports (OICRs)<sup>1</sup> to demonstrate progress towards research outcomes. The CGIAR Research Program on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (CCAFS) encourages all of its approximately 70 projects to share outcome cases during the annual reporting cycle. Once developed, these are evaluated internally based on a number of criteria, and

the highest-scoring cases are reported in the CCAFS and CGIAR annual reports.

Projects are encouraged to submit any (significant) changes they observed over the past reporting period in their annual reports to the program to build a body of observed changes and allow for evaluating emergence and dynamics of changes over time. Projects do this in a given standard format/template<sup>2</sup> that is included in the online reporting tool (called MARLO<sup>3</sup>).

The program's internal evaluations show that a large number of outcomes have been submitted over the years. The body of collected cases showed that some cases were weak or did not address a significant outcome in that particular reporting year. Others showed weaknesses in write-up or lacked rigor in evidence.

To help projects improve on reporting their outcomes, we looked at all project outcome cases that were submitted between 2016 and 2019 and how they were evaluated. The findings of this investigation provide some lessons learned on what helps to make a strong outcome story as well as common mistakes to avoid.

<sup>1</sup> We use the term outcome case throughout this Info Note for consistency.

<sup>2</sup> CCAFS has used a template since 2014 and in 2017 the template was adjusted and developed as a standard for the whole CGIAR portfolio of Research Programs and Platforms. [See the template here.](#)

<sup>3</sup> MARLO is an online planning and reporting tool and stands for Managing Agricultural Research for Learning and Outcomes. It is used by nine CGIAR Research Programs and two CGIAR Platforms to collect project information and synthesize and aggregate information on the program and system level.

## Box 1 - What is, and what is not, an outcome

**What is an outcome?** An outcome is a change in knowledge, skills, attitudes and/or relationships, manifested as a change in behavior, to which research outputs and related activities have contributed. An outcome is use of the research by non-research partners to develop new, or change, policies and practices. In many cases the users of the research will be policy makers (or those influencing the policy process), national development agencies, service providers to farmers including non-governmental agencies, and sometimes farmers themselves. From the perspective of CCAFS, an outcome is uptake by tens of thousands of farmers who are *not* part of the research process.

**What is not an outcome?** Many reports covered activities that are not yet outcomes. For example, while the following are significant and necessary steps towards outcomes, they are not considered outcomes in themselves in CCAFS evaluation:

- Uptake of the results to design further research work, even if this further work will be conducted by national partners; CGIAR research and new ideas taken up by the national system. Getting more research done is too early in the impact pathway to be considered matured.
- Widespread media uptake of research results or article downloads and dissemination metrics.
- 200 farmers using a technology in the testing of that technology.
- Training 1500 persons.

**Outcome case:** An outcome case report focuses on a particular unit—a person, a site, a project. It often uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. Outcome cases can be particularly useful for understanding how different elements fit together and how different elements (implementation, context and other factors) have produced the observed changes in practice/behavior. The outcome cases reported may be at different stages of maturity and can be used for different purposes in evaluation and reporting to funders.

## CCAFS internal evaluation process and criteria

### Process

CCAFS outcome cases are reviewed by four evaluators, including two program staff, one external reviewer with experience in a donor agency, and one external reviewer with over 20 years of experience in research for development.<sup>4</sup> The scores of external evaluators get 67% weightage, while the internal reviewers account for the remaining 33%.

The evaluators review the reported cases based on the write-up, evidence and significance. They score the outcome cases on a scale from 1 to 5 and provide feedback for project leaders, often detailing what they thought was missing or could have been improved. Since scoring is subjective, occasionally the evaluators give different feedback.

### Criteria

- 15% of the overall score is for the **write-up**. Outcome cases should describe the outcome in a compelling but simple way, with a comprehensive description of outputs, how these were used, as well as a concise coverage of activities.
- 20% of the overall score is for the **evidence** presented. The evidence needs to be easily accessible and to show clearly how the work is resulting in positive changes in policy or practice. Below we illustrate different types of evidence and their rigor and quality.
- 65% of the overall score is for the **significance** of the outcome. Often the significance of outcomes increases with time and therefore cases get re-submitted when a substantial change occurs.

<sup>4</sup> In 2016, evaluators involved 2 coordinating staff (whose combined score was weighted 50%), and one external reviewer with >20 years' experience in R4D (weighted 50%).

Each criterion is scored from 1 to 5 and the final score for the outcome case is used to categorize the case from not acceptable as an outcome to excellent. Scoring has changed slightly over the years; in 2016 and 2018 studies were categorized into five groups (unacceptable as an outcome/not evaluated; relatively poor/not yet an outcome; reasonable/OK; good; excellent). In years 2017 and 2019, studies fell under four categories (not yet an outcome; reasonable/OK; good; excellent).

## Overview of outcome cases

In 2016-2019, 207 outcome case studies were submitted in annual project reporting for evaluation. In total, 28 cases were rated as unacceptable, 49 relatively poor, 88 considered OK/acceptable, 34 as good and 8 as excellent (Table 1).

	Unacceptable/ not evaluated	Relatively poor/not yet an outcome	OK/ reasonable	Good	Excellent	Number of studies per year	Mean score
2016	4	18	17	5	1	45	1.73
2017	N/A	17	21	12	1	51	1.94
2018	24	10	34	10	2	80	2.07
2019	N/A	4	16	7	4	31	2.35
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>207</b>	

Table 1. Number of outcome cases and ratings.

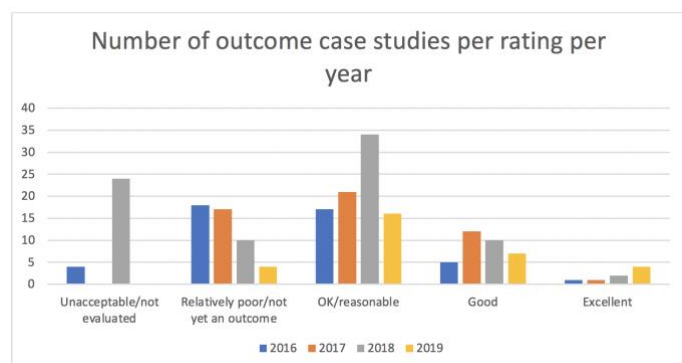


Figure 1. Ratings of outcome cases over the years.

## Lessons learned from evaluators' feedback

We assessed the feedback provided by the evaluators and mapped them to the scores and ratings as well as the criteria. Below is a summary for each rating (except studies not rated/not considered outcomes).

### Relatively poor/not yet an outcome

**Write-up:** For studies rated as relatively poor/not yet an outcome, the write-up is often not good enough. For example, the link to CCAFS work is not clear, the description is not well written, acronyms are not spelled out, the language is too technical or sometimes the writers assume too much knowledge by the external readers, e.g. the text does not include basic explanations of the context.

**Evidence:** Evidence submitted for these studies is often not strong enough to support the case. They are, for

example, grey literature from an official agency with only one reference or plenty of a project's own publications which are not so relevant.

**Significance:** Studies considered as relatively poor may be on the way to becoming outcomes but in general they are at an early stage. They may often show some important engagement or activities that would enable them to increase their significance in coming years.

### OK/reasonable

**Write-up:** For studies regarded as OK/reasonable, the write-up or narrative is poor, including links and attachments to the study that often are not working. For some cases with non-English references, evaluators suggested adding English summaries.

**Evidence:** For these studies, evidence usually supports the study. Evidence shows some impressive engagement, and they make CCAFS involvement clear. However, there are studies rated as OK/reasonable where the evidence is not strong enough and where the impact is unclear or has not been assessed. Evidence includes, for example, grey literature from official agencies with a few references; self-reported downloads that look well done; a letter from a key official with some details; self-reported outcome with details of partners in open access (web); internal blogs on own website.

**Significance:** Evaluators note that these studies are emerging outcomes, and scores would increase if implementation progresses. These studies include, for example, plans/strategies with some change made by policy stakeholders.

### Good

**Write-up:** good writing.

**Evidence:** For these studies evidence is usually strong, for example, a letter from a key official with excellent details of CCAFS involvement; blogs at the end of a process by non-CGIAR entities; a national-published policy paper with clear reference to CCAFS.

**Significance:** Studies rated as good show huge potential even if the outcome is at an early stage. For example, studies could indicate policy change with limited significance, or impact on a smaller number of farmers.

### Excellent

**Write-up:** Good write up.

**Evidence:** Evidence for a study rated as excellent is a substantive report or study from an external evaluation.



*Significance:* A significant outcome could be, for example, many farmers benefitting from it as well as a huge important policy outcome (e.g. 1 million farmers in India—and noting it is relative, i.e. 50,000 farmers in Mali would be much more significant than 50,000 farmers in India).

Some additional suggestions from one of the external reviewers are shown in Box 2.

#### **Box 2: Recommendations on providing good evidence for outcome cases**

- Evidence *must* have supporting links and make sure the links provided work and are easy to access.
- Links to very lengthy documents require concrete page reference.
- Highlight/ use only the best sources of information.

Sometimes evidence is sensitive—for example, in the early stages of policy design. In such cases, the evidence presented may need to be kept confidential, but is still then passed on to the evaluators with a request not to share the information.

## **Conclusion**

Lessons learned from outcome cases submitted over the past few years have undoubtedly helped project leaders improve on outcome reporting. These include the following:

- Defining what is and what is not an outcome has required some time. CCAFS's current guidance on this is shown in Box 1.
- Good outcome case studies need to be backed up by solid evidence. Some CGIAR Centers provide evidence of their outcomes—one example is a validation report of outcome stories for CIAT-CCAFS projects in Colombia.<sup>5</sup> This outcome study cost less than USD 10,000. However, it is only useful to do such studies when there is a good outcome. In CIAT's case the consultant report actually showed they had achieved more than they had first thought.

- Investors like outcomes that report (and provide evidence for) large numbers of farmers adopting a practice/technology or large numbers of hectares covered. Providing investors and funders with solid evidence that they can use to demonstrate to their constituents the value of development assistance is extremely important.
- The significance of the outcome reported needs to be made clear. Evaluators should not have to dig around in the evidence presented to make their own assessment of significance—projects need to do this for them.
- Some outcomes take a long time in coming, if they come at all, often beyond the time span of a project's direct involvement. This applies particularly to policy- and investment-related projects. This highlights the need to keep track of outcomes, where this is possible, so that the contribution tracking and evidence can be strengthened through time.

*This brief is an output for the CCAFS Flagship on Priorities and Policies for CSA. List of authors:*

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CCAFS is led by the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) and supported by:

