



RESEARCH  
PROGRAMON  
Dryland Systems

June 2015

# Outcome Story Toolkit Guidelines and Template



*Photo: Onion Irrigation in India/IWMI*

Food security and better livelihoods  
for rural dryland communities

The CGIAR Research Program on Dryland Systems aims to improve the lives of 1.6 billion people and mitigate land and resource degradation in 3 billion hectares covering the world's dry areas. Dryland Systems engages in integrated agricultural systems research to address key socioeconomic and biophysical constraints that affect food security, equitable and sustainable land and natural resource management, and the livelihoods of poor and marginalized dryland communities. The program unifies eight CGIAR Centres and uses unique partnership platforms to bind together scientific research results with the skills and capacities of national agricultural research systems (NARS), advanced research institutes (ARIs), non-governmental and civil society organizations, the private sector, and other actors to test and develop practical innovative solutions for rural dryland communities.

The program is led by the International Centre for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), a member of the CGIAR Consortium. CGIAR is a global agriculture research partnership for a food secure future.

For more information please visit:

[drylandsystems.cgiar.org](http://drylandsystems.cgiar.org)



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# Table of Contents

I.	INTRODUCTION .....	3
II.	WHAT IS AN OUTCOME STORY.....	4
III.	WHY DO I NEED TO PRODUCE AN OUTCOME STORY? .....	4
	a. Benefits for increased funding and collaboration .....	4
	b. Benefits for researchers .....	5
	c. Benefits for society .....	6
IV.	CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF AN OUTCOME STORY .....	6
V.	OUTCOMES GLOSSARY .....	7
VI.	SOME DRYLAND SYSTEMS DEFINITIONS .....	8
VII.	DRYLAND SYSTEMS KEY THEMES .....	8
VIII.	STYLE REMINDERS .....	8
IX.	OUTCOME STORY TEMPLATE.....	11

*“After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world,”  
Philip Pullman, author.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Sharing stories of success is one of the most important things we can do to motivate and inspire individuals, communities, governments and partners to continue collaborating with the [CGIAR Research Program on Dryland Systems](#) (Dryland Systems), as well as support investments in effective research-in-development for drylands. In recent years, donor agencies have been placing increasing emphasis on the need for evidence of economic and social returns from investment in research. Outcome stories can document progress and program improvements over time, and demonstrate the value of program activities. When presented effectively, outcome stories can be a useful tool for educating donors and stakeholders about the results and impact of our program.

Dryland Systems intends to use outcome stories to highlight achievements and progress of program research activities to a host of audiences, including farmers and farmer associations who are our primary beneficiaries, partners at national, regional and global levels, the private sector, existing and prospective donors, and so forth.

By improving the way we capture and communicate our program achievements in terms of outcomes and impact on both practice and policy, Dryland Systems will be better positioned to support the case for more research and investment in the dryland communities of the developing world, where the majority of the world’s poor live.

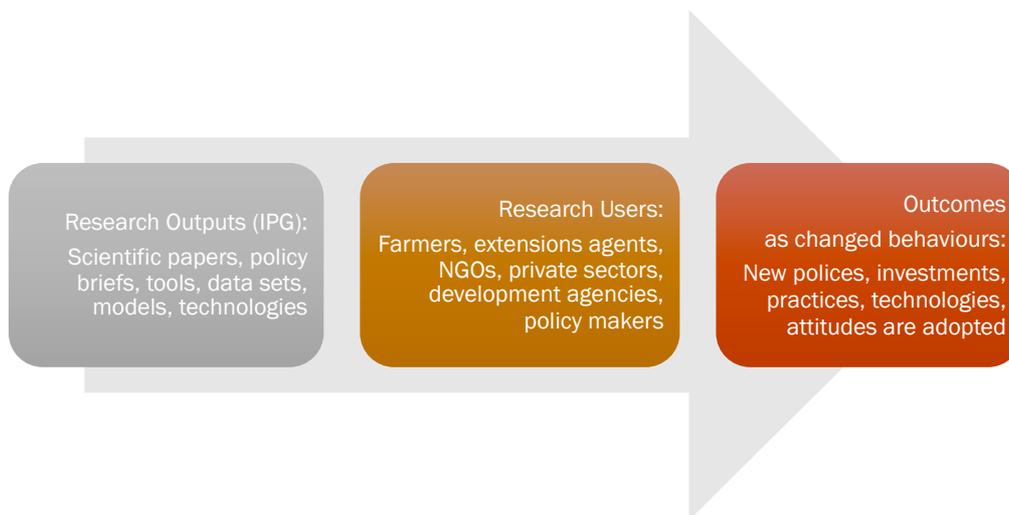
This **Outcome Story Toolkit: Guidelines and Template** targets all research scientists, science communications specialists and partners affiliated with Dryland Systems. The toolkit is meant to guide the development of Dryland Systems outcomes stories by providing a simple definition and the critical elements of an outcome story, highlighting the benefits of developing outcome stories, providing simple style guidelines and including an **Outcome Story Template** with self-check tools to guide the writing process. This template is also made available electronically to our program scientists and science communication specialists via Dryland Systems [Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning \(MEL\) platform](#).

This toolkit was prepared by **Tana Lala-Pritchard**, Dryland Systems Communication Program Coordinator. The toolkit is meant to be a living document and will be updated regularly. Your feedback and suggestions for further improvement are welcome. For further information and assistance on how to use these guidelines and the related Outcome Story Template, please contact the author at [t.lala-pritchard@cgiar.org](mailto:t.lala-pritchard@cgiar.org)

## II. WHAT IS AN OUTCOME STORY?

An outcome story captures and identifies changes in knowledge, skills, practices, behaviours, attitudes, policies and/or investments that emerged as a result of research conducted in the framework of Dryland Systems and/or mapped to the program.

**Outcomes** occur when research outputs in the form of **International Public Goods (IPG)**, such as, research papers, policy recommendations, guidelines, databases and data sets, tools, models, trials, methodologies, innovative practices and technologies, and so forth are proactively disseminated and made freely available to intermediary and direct research users (such as, farmers, extension agents, non-governmental organizations, private sectors, development agencies, policy makers, etc.) who in turn use the research outputs and evidence to improve and change how they go about conducting their usual business (such as, farming practices, policies, investments, attitudes, etc.).



## III. WHY DO I NEED TO PRODUCE AN OUTCOME STORY?

As we conduct program research activities, it is important to take the time to capture progress, accomplishments and lessons learned challenges, attained along the way. The benefits of doing so are manifest in a number of ways:

### a. Benefits for increased funding and collaboration

By continuously sharing our achievements, Dryland Systems can establish and increase a more advantageous position vis-à-vis donors, policymakers or other stakeholders, who make decisions that affect funding and activities of the program. The more educated these audiences are about our program’s goals, our research outcomes and impact, the more likely they are to collaborate with and support Dryland Systems. There are a number of good reasons for developing and sharing research outcome stories, which are summarized as follows:

Good reasons for research outcome stories	
1	Capturing progress over time
2	Educating donors, policy makers and beneficiaries about the impact of our program
3	Attracting new partners for collaboration
4	Raising funds for continuing research

5	Demonstrating responsible use of program resources to donors and stakeholders
6	Documenting and sharing challenges and best practices for learning purposes

Outcome stories will help us to demonstrate that dryland systems research is both important and necessary– that it is worth investing in and supporting. In this regard, outcome stories can help highlight the value of our research in terms of:

- *Academic impact:* the demonstrable contribution that excellent dryland systems research makes to scientific advances, across and within disciplines, including significant advances in understanding, method, theory, innovative technology and application.
- *Economic and societal impact:* the demonstrable contribution that excellent systems research makes to drylands and global society and economy, of benefit to individuals, organisations and nations.

Outcome stories can help us demonstrate how the impact of Dryland Systems research is:

- *Instrumental:* influencing the development of policy, practice, technology or service provision, shaping legislation, altering behaviour
- *Conceptual:* contributing to the understanding of policy issues, reframing debates
- *Practical and Capacity Development:* through technical and personal skill development

To plan and document outcomes effectively you need to ensure the following:

Planning Your Research Outcome Stories	
1	Identify your <b>key stakeholders</b> , for example, a specific dryland community, a farming organization, a women’s group, young researchers; the public sector; the private sectors, etc.
2	Identify <b>how they will benefit from your research</b> – types of outcomes and impact might include: improving a public service; influencing public policy; contributing to capacity development; etc.
3	Identify <b>how you will ensure they have the opportunity to benefit</b> , for example through participatory research action, on-farm trials, new technology, new institutional arrangements, public events, etc.

### b. Benefits for researchers

To maximise the impact of your research, you need to engage with your key user groups. This can provide substantial benefits for the quality of your own research, including:

1. *Feedback* – to help shape your research agenda and improve methodologies
2. *Relevance* – to ensure your research is meaningful, timely and useful
3. *Greater participation in your research* – to enlist participants for focus group discussions and surveys
4. *New Skills* – to strengthen your overall communication skills so that you can describe your work more confidently to different kinds of audiences.
5. *Increased visibility* – for yourself and your work by reaching out and engaging with a greater number of scientists from other disciplines, as well as the general public.
6. *Lessons Learned* – by taking the time to evaluate successful outcomes of you, you will also be force yourself to examine the process of what worked, what didn’t and why. These lessons can then be shared with other colleagues and considered in your future work.

### c. Benefits for society

High quality dryland systems research has the potential to enhance social and economic wellbeing across all dryland communities. By ensuring that decisions on policy and practice are informed by secure evidence, outcome stories can help demonstrate how dryland systems research can help to:

1. Reduce poverty, improve food and nutrition security
2. Improve social wellbeing and enhance the quality of life
3. Address gender inequality
4. Create opportunities for disenfranchised young people
5. Increase economic prosperity by generating income and creating wealth
6. Protect the environment and preserve natural resources.
7. Encourage capacity to innovate in the face of global challenges such as climate change
8. Improve the effectiveness and sustainability of public, private and third sector organisations.

## IV. CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF AN OUTCOME STORY

Dryland Systems Outcome Stories should highlight how we are moving along the impact pathway from research outputs to one or more specific outcomes. Ideally the outcome stories should reflect and include the following elements:

Planning Your Research Outcome Stories		
1	<b>WHO-WHAT-HOW</b>	The research outcome story should clearly identify: (a) Who is the beneficiary or group of beneficiaries? (b) What specific research-in-development intervention took place? (c) How was that intervention delivered?
2	<b>INTEGRATED SYSTEMS APPROACH</b>	The story should highlight the application of <a href="#">integrated systems research</a> and systems based approaches for building resilience and/or ensuring sustainable agricultural intensification in drylands.
3	<b>TYPES OF OUTCOMES</b>	The story must be linked to the types of outcomes Dryland Systems expects to achieve in terms of influencing and/or improving: (a) <b>Livelihoods</b> of local dryland communities and people in terms of resilience, adaptation, social equity, food and nutrition security, healthy and sustainable management of dryland ecosystems, and so forth; (b) <b>Practices</b> of governments, donors, private sector or how INGOs/NGOs implement their programs at different levels (c) <b>Policies, guidelines, conventions</b> at the global, regional or national level.
4	<b>IMPACT PATHWAY</b>	The narrative of each story must clearly reflect the theory of change inherent in the impact pathway of the Flagship concerned and/or its contribution to overall Dryland Systems <a href="#">Intermediate Development Outcomes (IDOs)</a>
5	<b>GENDER</b>	The story should indicate, where possible, how gender-related issues are being addressed and/or how gender was integrated into the research. The stories should clearly demonstrate how incorporation of gender improves systems thinking and articulation of development solutions for dryland communities.

6	<b>Scalability</b>	The narrative should focus on demonstrating the scalability of outcomes and impact by answering the question: If these results were scaled up and out how many livelihoods and hectares of land could be potentially affected and improved?
7	<b>Partnership Approach</b>	The story should outline the partnership approach to designing and implementing the research, identifying critical partners at local, national, regional and global level and their role in achieving the outcomes.
8	<b>Inter-center and inter-CRP Collaboration</b>	The story should demonstrate how inter-disciplinary scientific collaboration took place amongst different partner centres and other CRPs.
9	<b>Acknowledgment</b>	The story must include an Acknowledgement to identify the contribution of Dryland Systems and other donors in compliance with the <a href="#">Dryland Systems Branding and Acknowledgment Guidelines</a> and the Program Implementation Agreement (PIM).

The outcome stories should be specific, that is, they should relate to specific challenges, actors, solutions, and outcomes, and they should describe one compelling event or a series of events and milestone outcomes.

In choosing a project/activity to highlight, remember that most programs undergo varying stages of capacity, maturity, and accomplishment. When your project/activity is in its early stages, for example, you might want to provide a description of the proposed activities and the anticipated outcomes, highlight partnerships that are created, document important policy changes achieved as a result of the program, or illustrate the population being served by the program. Emphasize short-term outcomes when highlighting accomplishments in early-stage activities.

As your project/activity advances, you may have some promising stories and examples of early changes to share. Although you haven't achieved the long-term outcomes yet, you are on the right track and you want your partners and funders to know about your progress. You may have some preliminary data from your program to show that you are definitely making progress. For example, you can demonstrate how and to what extent your program is reaching or serving a specific population.

## V. OUTCOMES GLOSSARY

The table below provides a concise summary of key definitions relating to outcomes.

<b>INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES</b>	<b>Outcomes of a program achieved within 2 to 3 years of program initiation, often including changes in behavior, norms, or policies.</b>
<b>OUTCOMES</b>	Specific changes that are direct results of program activities, including changes in knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors. Outcomes can be considered in three time blocks: short, intermediate and long-term effects.
<b>LONG-TERM OUTCOMES</b>	Outcomes achieved within 2 to 3 years of program initiation, and often include changes in organizations and systems.
<b>SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES</b>	Outcomes achieved within 1 to 2 years of program initiation and often focus on change in knowledge, attitudes, and skills.
<b>OUTPUTS</b>	The amount of product or service that the program intends to provide. These include specific types, levels, and targets of services to be delivered by the program.
<b>PARTNERS</b>	Agencies, organizations, and groups with which you collaborate or associate to further the goals of your program research activity.

<b>STAKEHOLDER</b>	An individual or organization that has a substantial interest (i.e., credibility, financial, or power) in a program and its results.
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## VI. SOME DRYLAND SYSTEMS DEFINITIONS

When developing your outcome stories, please keep in mind some of the key Dryland Systems definitions:

*Integrated systems approach is defined as a holistic approach that integrates components of human and agro-ecological systems across all dimensions in order to improve agricultural livelihoods in drylands.*

*Agricultural livelihood systems are defined as the sets of farm, farming and human activity systems that determine the livelihood opportunities for agricultural households, enterprises or communities.*

They are in order of appearance below: Pastoral, Agropastoral, Rainfed, Tree-Based and Irrigated.



The Value of Dryland Systems Research can be summarized as follows:

The Value of Dryland Systems Research	
1	Offers a comprehensive understanding of intractable drylands development challenges
2	Develops and formulates appropriate technologies, practices, institutions and policies for solving those challenges
3	Facilitates scaling out and up for greater development impact
4	Multi-stakeholder engagement for greater ownership of impact
5	Builds capacities to innovate for more sustainable development impact
6	Entails continuous monitoring, evaluation and learning
7	Provides credible evidence for increased investments in drylands

## VII. DRYLAND SYSTEMS KEY THEMES

When developing your outcome story, you should also keep in mind some of the key themes inherent in Dryland Systems:

- Agricultural livelihoods systems
- Integrated systems research
- Resilience
- Food Security and Food Access
- Climate change
- Sustainable agricultural intensification
- Sustainable natural resource management
- Health and Well-being
- Nutrition and Biodiversity

- Increased Income and Wealth
- Gender and Women’s Empowerment
- Youth Employment and Opportunities
- Partnerships and Innovation platforms

Finally, when drafting your outcome story, please do not cut and paste from technical documents or research proposals. Write in your own words. Convey the facts, figures and implications of the research, as well as your passion and enthusiasm. And remember the primary purpose of the outcome story is not to promote your center, the activities of your DG, the individual scientists involved or simply describe the research activities as opposed to their actual results and impact in dryland communities.

### VIII. STYLE REMINDERS

The following table provides a few styles reminders to keep in mind when drafting your outcome stories:

OUTCOME STORY STYLE REMINDERS	
<b>LENGTH</b>	Keep paragraphs short—no more than three to four sentences.
	Keep story to no more than 1500 words.
<b>NARRATIVE</b>	Stick to the facts. Do not interject an opinion unless you attribute it to someone.
	Describe the activities succinctly; outline the action steps taken.
	Describe the problem/issue/challenge being addressed and why it’s important.
	Include direct quotes if they strengthen the story.
	Use numbers to quantify results and convey the compelling outcomes of the program/activity.
	Keep messages simple and concise.
	Provide an effective conclusion to wrap up the story. Emphasize the broader potential benefits of implementing the program.
	Avoid using passive voice (e.g., “Trainings were provided.”). Use active voice (e.g., “X partner provided Y trainings.”), and be clear about who is doing the action in every sentence.
<b>LANGUAGE</b>	Limit use of acronyms. If you use acronyms, spell them out in the first instance.
	Use plain language.
	Avoid jargon. Readers often skip over terms they don’t understand, hoping to get their meaning from the rest of the sentence.
<b>Acknowledgment</b>	Establish and acknowledge link to Dryland Systems.

Additional communications guidance regarding language, style, visuals, branding and acknowledgment is provided in the [Dryland Systems Branding Guidelines](#). For further information and assistance on how to use these guidelines and outcome story template, please contact:

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## OUTCOME STORY TEMPLATE

This template is intended for use of Dryland Systems scientists and partners to identify and highlight outcomes of their research activities funded by and/or mapped to the program. Each section in the template is followed by a self-check, which outlines criteria relevant to that section. The maximum number of word required to fill this template is 1450- 1500.

<b>Name of research activity/project title:</b>	
<b>Flagship:</b>	
<b>Geographical region:</b>	
<b>Name and email of Activity Lead:</b>	
<b>Name and email of Outcome Story Lead:</b>	
<b>Activity Lead Center:</b>	
<b>Activity Partner Center(s):</b>	
<b>Activity Partner CRPs:</b>	

### 1. Outcome Story Headline:

Guidance:

*In no more than 15-20 words, please provide a descriptive headline that captures the main research outcome*

**SELF-CHECK - Have you:**

- Captured the overall message of the outcome story?
- Included an action verb?
- Captured the reader's attention?

### 2. Outcome Story Abstract

**Word limit: 200 words**

**SELF-CHECK - Have you:**

- Summarized the problem, program/activity, and outcomes?
- Provided a summary with specific measurable outcomes that avoids broad, sweeping statements such as "There was a noticeable increase in healthy eating habits"?

### 3. Problem/Challenge Overview:

Some guidance:

Start with the issue, challenge, problem or opportunity that Dryland Systems has aimed to address. This should relate to one of the IDOs (resilience, wealth and wellbeing, food access, natural resources management, gender empowerment, capacity to innovate).

Clarify who this outcome story is about (e.g., farmer, scientist, community, research partner, policy maker, etc.) by adding a human interest angle. Who is/was experiencing this problem/challenge and how would they benefit if it was solved? What are the opportunities and what is at stake for a person, community or other group of people?

**Word limit: 150 words**

**SELF-CHECK – Have you:**

- Described the issue(s), challenge(s), problem(s), opportunities being addressed and why are these important?
- Used data to frame the problem, including the social and economic costs?
- Specified the affected dryland population(s)?
- Specified the affected dryland area (in hectares)

### 4. What are the main research activities:

Some guiding questions:

Please describe the main research question(s), activities, strategy and timeline.

What did you do to address the aforementioned challenge(s) and make the most of the opportunities available?

How were different research users engaged in or consulted in the research process?

How do you think this made your research better?

**Word limit: 150 words**

**SELF-CHECK – Have you:**

- Described your approach of designing and implementing the research?
- Identified the various research users involved at different stages of the research process?
- Identified any major shifts or changes to the research activities and approach?

### 5. What are the main Outcomes of your research?

**An outcome is generally defined as the short-term and medium-term effect of an intervention's outputs, such as change in knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors.**

Bearing this definition in mind, please provide a short description of the actual changes that occurred as a result of your research activities and outputs. How are different users utilizing your research outputs? What has changed in their practice, policy and/or investment? How and why did they take up the research outputs? What are the key milestones in the timeline of change that occurred? What is the potential for scaling the outcome up and out?

**Word limit: 200 words**

**SELF-CHECK – Have you:**

- Described actual changes that occurred as opposed to desired or anticipated changes in your initial research proposal?
- Identified any outcomes that you did not intend or anticipate? How are these justified and/or attributed to your activities?
- Demonstrated the scalability of the outcomes for greater reach and impact (in terms of both dryland communities and land area)?

**6. What are the main research Outputs that resulted in the outcome(s)?**

**Outputs are generally defined as the tangible products or direct deliverables of your research activities**, such as research papers, publications, policy recommendations, models, on-farm trials, methodologies, technologies, assessments, improved seeds, increased yields, hectares of degraded land restored, quantity of natural resources management, efficiency gains, new institutional arrangements made, participatory research actions, innovation platforms, trainings, etc.

Bearing this definition in mind, please list the main research outputs of your research that led to the outcomes reported above.

**Word limit: 150 words**

**SELF-CHECK – Have you:**

- Identified all types of outputs delivered and observed?
- Included facts and figures to demonstrate the strength and outreach of your research outputs?
- Avoided vague output statements such as “farmers benefited from increased food security as a result of our assessments of crop varieties.”

**7. Who were the intermediary and direct users of your research outputs and what role did they play in achieving the outcome:**

Guidance:

Please list the main intermediary and direct users of your research and indicate the role they played in achieving the reported outcomes

For example:

X partners were the intermediary users of the research outputs for dissemination of the technology/tool/practice

Y partners were the intermediary/direct users of research outputs for formulation of policy or development project

X number of farmers in X area were are the direct users of the technology/tool/practice

**Word limit: 100 words**

**SELF-CHECK – Have you:**

- Clearly identified all users and distinguished between intermediary and direct users of your research?
- Described their specific related role in terms of research, development, technology dissemination, policy formulation, adaptation, adoption, etc.?
- Used facts and figures to strengthen your statements?

## 8. How were your research outputs used (will be used in the future):

Describe how your research output was used and what changes occurred? How did these changes set the stage for the achievements of the outcomes reported above? Where there any research activities and changes you did not anticipate, and if so, how did you adjust? What steps did each user take to adopt, scale out or scale up the results of your research outputs? What are the follow up actions to ensure sustainability?

**Word limit: 150 words**

### **SELF-CHECK – Have you:**

- Described actual changes that occurred during or immediate after the release of your research outputs?
- Identified how the use of research outputs set the stage for achieving the outcomes?
- Identified steps and actions for ensuring sustainability?

## 9. What is the Evidence of Your Research Outcomes:

Provide solid evidence for this outcome (Document, news article, impact assessment, etc.) in terms of actions and changed behaviour of users and beneficiaries of your research. How can these changed actions and behaviours be sustained in the long run?

**Word limit: 150 words**

### **SELF-CHECK – Have you:**

- Identified how the actions and behaviours of key stakeholders have now changed?
- Identified how these changes will be sustained?

## 10. Testimonials:

Testimonials are written or recorded statements that support program credibility and level of expertise. They also strengthen our reputation by expressing the trust that other people have in the program and its offerings. They are a wonderful way to help us to attract a deeper interest from existing and prospective stakeholders. Testimonials are the holy grail of marketing and advertising. [Marketing Experiments](#) demonstrate that testimonials can work wonders. For example, a written testimonial can [increase customer conversion by 25%](#); video testimonials on the other hand, can increase the conversion rates [increased by a whopping 201%](#)!

- Testimonials from Beneficiaries (quote, video, letter, interview, survey, etc.)
- Testimonials from Partners (quote, video, letter, interview, survey, etc.)

### **SELF-CHECK – Have you:**

- Included the name, position, organization and location of person giving the testimonial?
- Included a testimonial that clearly identifies a direct benefit to a person/community/organizations, as opposed to vague general praise for the program activity?
- Included a testimonial that captures the beneficiary's strong emotion stemming from the outcome of your activities in his/her life, community, organization, etc.?
- Ensured each quote is no more than 2-3 lines.

**11. Lessons Learned:**

Lessons learned are usually defined as generalizations based on the evaluation of programs, interventions or policies that abstract from the specific circumstances to broader situations. Frequently, lessons highlight strengths or weaknesses in preparation, design, and implementation that affect performance, outcome, and impact.

Some guiding questions:

- What did you learn in this process?
- What was difficult or challenging?
- How did you overcome the challenges faced?
- How did you engaged or worked with partners successfully?
- If you were to start over, what would you do differently?

**Word limit: 200 words**

**SELF-CHECK – Have you:**

- Identified both challenges/weaknesses and successes/strengths?
- Identified what you might have done differently to ensure a better outcome or greater impact?
- Identified who/what other organization/canter/CRP can potentially benefit from these lessons?

**12. Full reference citations and URL link to published research work.**

For all research publications and other types of research outputs (data, tools, guidelines etc.) associated with this outcome story, please include below:

**13. Please check any of the following that are being submitted to complement your outcome story:**

- Testimonials from Beneficiaries (quote, video, letter, interview, survey, etc.)
- Testimonials from Partners (quote, video, letter, interview, survey, etc.)
- Full reference citations and URL hyperlinks to published research work
- Blog and/or other website stories with URL links
- Newspaper Articles (print or electronic)
- Communication (non-scientific) Materials Produced (brochure, poster, press release, etc.)
- Supporting Materials (presentations, workshop reports, activity reports, donor reports)
- Photo(s) (of landscape, beneficiaries and activities) with appropriate captions and credit
- Video/Audio Clips
- Other (please explain: \_\_\_\_\_)

## 14. Final Checklist

Please use the following checklist to ensure your outcome story is ready for sharing.

No.	Question to consider	Yes	No
1	Does the story describe the outcomes the research produced and the people who are benefitting? What changes—in skills, knowledge, attitude, practice, or policy—has the research brought, and who is benefitting from these changes?		
2	Does the story capture outcomes from an interesting angle (possibly a human angle) that would captivate the attention of the target audience?		
3	Does the story explain what new insights the research brings? Does the story describe a key insight on what works and what doesn't and something that future research could build on. What are the main lesson learned?		
4	Does the story make a compelling point that people will remember? Does the story show how the research makes a difference to improving livelihoods and reducing poverty?		
5	Does the story provide interesting facts that people will remember?		
6	Does the story explain in clear and measurable ways the kind of impact - beyond the level of the reported outcomes - could be achieved if the research outputs scaled out and up?		
7	Does the story show which partners contributed and how?		
8	Does the story include quotes from scientists, partners and/or beneficiaries?		
9	Have I provided links to other media (journal articles, website news, newsletter, blogs, annual reports of other CGIAR centres, CRPs) that also feature this story?		
10	Have I provided the contact details of people who can provide more information?		



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For more information, please visit

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