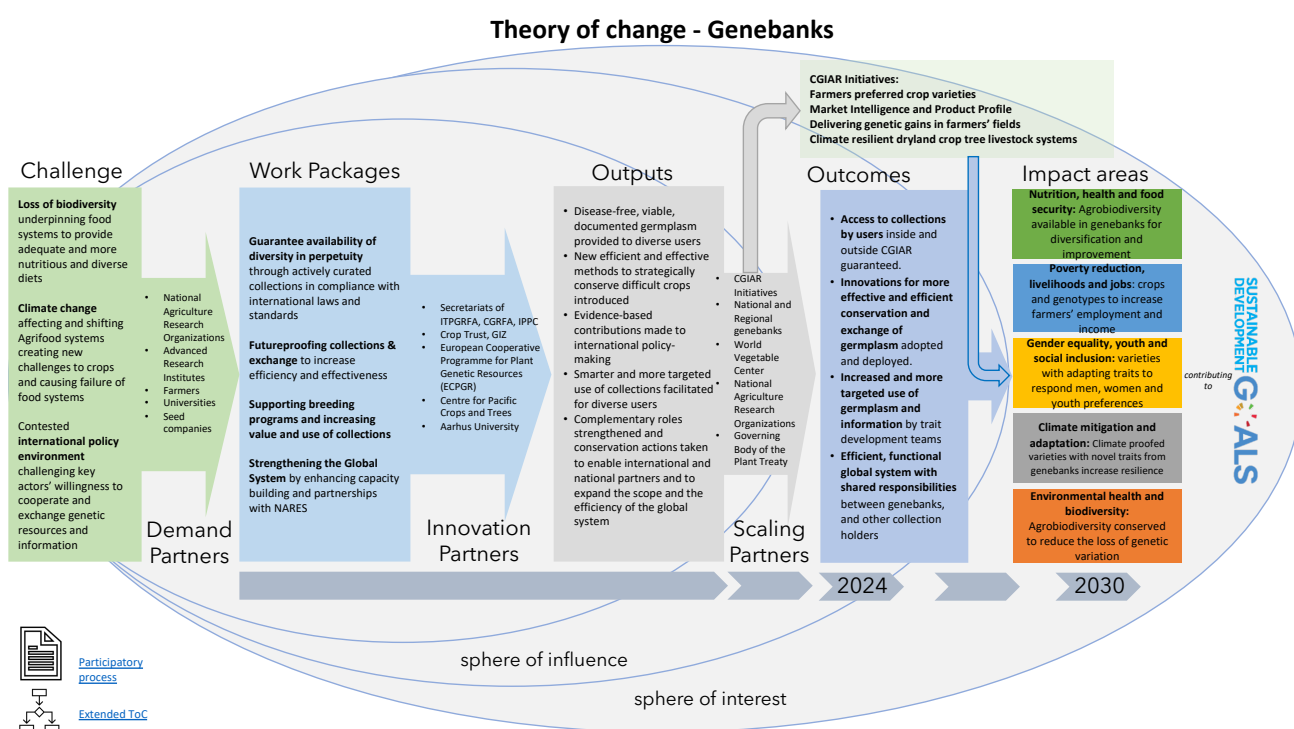




Participatory Planning for Genebank Initiative Theory of Change

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Context

As part of planning for the CGIAR's Genebank Initiative –which aims to implement a wide range of technological advances and institutional measures to conserve important genetic resources–, a participatory planning process was implemented to prepare a theory of change (ToC), . The Initiative Design Team (IDT) created the ToC during a one-week process with the genebank managers serving as key stakeholders. It was facilitated by a team from CGIAR Research Program on Roots, Tubers and Bananas (RTB) Management Unit (PMU). The intention was to facilitate lively and sustained collaboration among team members, allowing for real-time production of knowledge and contribution. The design process used well defined conceptual frameworks and digital tools to enable proper consultation, collaborative brainstorming, and the frequent provision of feedback from the entire team.

The participatory process focused on the development of the theory of change (ToC): a model explaining how and why change is expected to happen along an impact pathway in a particular context. As a method, it allows for better comprehension of how activities, undertaken by an intervention (such as a project, program or policy), contribute to a chain of results which will affect communities, organisations, and places in complex ways. A ToC also helps in setting up the M&E for a program and the basis for future evaluations, by carefully mapping the anticipated effects, and thus consequences, of choices made.

Miro, a digital whiteboard, was used as the interface which facilitated the ToC exercise, allowing the genebank team to collaboratively brainstorm in real-time.

The process is organized in three stages. 1) Brainstorming to define initial outputs and outcomes 2) preparation draft TOC 3) Genebank managers validate the initial design and online workshop is facilitated using Miro. It is expected that the follow-up will involve teams from other initiatives, allowing the genebank's impact to be realized at proper scale. In a subsequent phase of full proposal development, the ToC will be validated with external actors. These external actors are split into three categories: demand, innovation, and scaling partners.

As initiatives turn increasingly ambitious, vying to engage with issues of environmental conservation, future crop diversity, and gender participation, it becomes vital to work with tools that clearly explain these complexities, without generalising or losing important detail. Rather than a static cloud document, participatory interfaces allow for additive knowledge production, with individual points constructed in consultation with a diversity of users and voices. It embraces a heterogeneity of opinion and facilitates active debate between team members. Frameworks (like ToC) and tools (like Miro) need to be integrated into organisational structures in order to properly host and encourage interdisciplinary and multi-actor collaboration.

Online workshop

The main elements of the ToC were drafted by the IDT using an excel based template and then migrated by the facilitation team onto an online platform, Miro¹, to allow collaboration between team members. The cloud-based collaboration tool, with its digital whiteboard, allowed all members to actively comment on the ToC draft in real-time. It tracked all significant edits and changes, highlighting areas which required improvement or the provision of further detail.

The validation session with genebank managers as stakeholders was organized as a one-hour event, which began with the team reviewing the objectives of the Genebank Initiative and its timeline. It was followed up by an explanation of TOC elements and use; an overview of initiative (including the Work Packages, outputs and outcomes); the use of online board (Miro) to illustrate the TOC; and finally, a 'participant feedback session' on the online board (for ToC use). The live interaction involved 15 participants who were able to access the online board –previously configured to allow entry without account configuration. The ease of the process increased the confidence of participants, justifying the use of an online solution.

The session involved one facilitator who provided an overview of the configured TOC elements, one staff member sharing the screen and indicating to the facilitator where users were adding comments with the zoom function, and one staff monitoring the chat and providing assistance. Technical comments provided in the chat were copied onto the board to ensure all feedback was fully captured. The core team was supporting the facilitator and providing responses to participant comments directly in the board using sticky notes. At the end of the session, the core team consolidated the comments and noted responses on how they have been addressed in the revised ToC. The next consultation with other initiatives and key partners will contribute to the further refinement of the ToC.

Lessons Learned

With fifteen participants online at the same time, Miro facilitated a truly collaborative experience. It allowed for multiple conversations to occur at once, whilst also encouraging feedback on all aspects of the initiative (from the macro to the micro). The format was appreciated by the participants, with Miro providing an array of stimulating visual components and an easy-to-navigate toolkit. Rather than relying on blocks of text, stick-notes and shapes of various sizes and colors inspired greater user engagement. It also produced a more visually appealing end-product which could be shared across platforms and included in future reports/articles.

Most of the team members required no assistance (despite encountering Miro for the first time) and carried out the exercise relatively effortlessly. The real-time aspect of the interface allowed for points to be built upon by each user, with additional comments emerging. This gave the entire ToC an additive quality, generating detail and diversity of thought.

¹ https://miro.com/app/board/o9J_lLcH6WA=/

Whilst there were numerous positives to the exercise, some problems did arise – particularly around clarity. Due to the number of users, the online whiteboard became a site of intense activity, with numerous sticky-notes and text comments. Often, these comments were either succinct sentences or singular words, needing further clarification. This led to some confusion as most contributions to the whiteboard were anonymous/made by anonymous users.

It was also difficult to track changes made as Miro does not provide a visible history of edits made to the document by each user. In terms of design, the whiteboard interface risks being too intricate. This can be avoided, however, by ensuring that a small team carries out maintenance regularly; clearing up certain sections, refining the text in each box, and deleting duplicates.

The core team observed the misuse of terms and confusion over connections between particular fields. Words like output and outcome were often used interchangeably. The use of a glossary and some examples – potentially with live exercises/quizzes –, could help on this subject for the next iteration of the exercise. A short guide or index could also be supplied to elaborate on the meaning of particular color-coded areas and lines.

The limitation related to the user anonymity could be overcome with users familiarising themselves with the platform and creating individual accounts. During the implementation phase, and in the midst of monitoring progress against the ToC, issues surrounding anonymity can be solved by providing an account to each key stakeholder or by purchasing a license.

On a more conceptual level it is important to provide guidance to participant on the primary intention of exercise since Miro allows both generative and organisational action. Generative may refer to creative conceptualisation or free form brainstorming the facilitators may want to collect from participants, whilst organisational action refers to the use of visual interfaces to tidy-up existing information prepared in advance by a core group. During the participatory process, team members were often attempting to do both. This can lead to confusion and the inefficient use of the tool. A guidance brief explaining the process and specifying intended activity outcome should be prepared for the next application of the method.