Module 2: Developing, Reviewing and Refining Your Causal Model

A. Objective

The objective of this Step is to help the project designers or implementation team to illustrate the causal pathways that link your planned interventions to your end goal. This step is completed through a participatory exercise, which has the benefit of helping to clarify what assumptions different people have about how you will achieve your results. You will work through these to come up with a common vision and also to identify the critical – or killer - assumptions in your model, which will help you to prioritize indicators, measurement tools and analysis processes in the steps ahead.

B. Overview

A causal model - also often called a theory of change, results chain, causal chain or logic model - is a tool used to consolidate, in one summary graphic:
- The overall project goal and purpose
- The linkages between project interventions and the effects these are expected to yield in support of the goal and purpose
- The assumptions being made about how these linkages work and will play out in practice.

Causal models allow project designers, managers and staff to be explicit about the ways in which they expect the project’s interventions to lead to positive effects on impact group and target group members over time. Importantly, in contrast to logical frameworks - which also remain a key aspect of many M&E plans - causal models are non-linear, allowing users to illustrate how interventions, effects and impacts are related to one another vertically, horizontally, diagonally, etc. This flexibility is important for systemic interventions like value chain programs, which often defy linear logic.

In practice, causal models are most useful when they serve not only as an illustration of a project design, but also as a common foundation upon which all project team members and key clients agree. This can be achieved by using participatory processes to design and review causal models as key points in the project lifecycle. This is why sound M&E systems for Value Chain programs rely on causal models to guide the development of their M&E systems: a practice that has long been in place but is increasingly encouraged by initiatives such as the Donor Committee for Enterprise Development’s Results Measurement Initiative.

Note: We already develop logframes. Do we really need a causal model too?

Yes, particularly for complex, systemic interventions like value chain projects.

Logframes and causal models serve different purposes and are both useful aspects of a good M&E system. Causal models provide a means of illustrating a project’s complete theory of change including the relationships between different interventions, effects and impacts. The advantage of a causal model is that it provides a picture of how the project will achieve its objectives, and it is not necessarily linear. Logframes, by contrast, are useful for consolidating some key information on activities, effects and impacts in a table. Typically, however, logframes force projects to present information in a linear fashion, which is not always very reflective of how things work in reality.

So, while you may need a logframe to meet a donor’s requirements, it is important to first have a causal model that enables your team and partners to see how you expect your interventions to lead to changes across the value chain.

1 This chapter draws on original content as well as content adapted from CARE’s Design, Monitoring and Evaluation Guide, MEDA’s Guide to Value Chain Program Design, and the Donor Committee for Economic Development Results Measurement Standard Implementation Guide. Many thanks go to the DCED and MEDA who willingly allowed us to use their content in this manner.
This chapter outlines what a causal model is, CARE’s standard causal model framework for value chain programs and how to develop a causal model (if your project does not already have one) or review your causal model (if it does) to initiate the M&E system design process.

**Introduction to Causal Models for Value Chain Projects**

For Value Chain projects, causal models are graphics that show how project interventions:

- a) Will directly influence the key aspects of the value chain – the end market, the enabling environment, the socio-economic context, value chain relationships, support product and service markets, business performance or entrepreneurship;
- b) How those changes are expected to indirectly affect the broader market system;
- c) What the impacts are intended to be on poverty, women’s empowerment and gender equality.

Once developed, causal models serve four core purposes:

- During project design, causal models:
  1. Establish a clear vision of how the objectives will be achieved by summarizing the causal flow between interventions and effects as well as the assumptions that are being made.
  2. Provide the design team with a simple way of re-assessing and finalizing the project design.

- Once a project is funded, causal models:
  3. Serve as the basis for the project monitoring and evaluation system.
  4. Help to improve performance by providing a touchstone for regular reflection among the implementers.

At all stages, the causal model is helpful in communicating project intent to a wide range of clients including potential donors, internal audiences, partners and project participants.

C. Materials / Inputs Recommended

**Documents:**

If you already have a project causal model, skip to Step 3 under “Step-by-Step Guide” in this chapter.

If you do not already have a causal model but used CARE’s Market Analysis and Value Chain Program Design course to design your project, you can use the following to help develop your causal model:

- Goal and Purpose Statements
- Master Problem Tree
- Sustainable Solutions Table
- Interventions Table
- Risk Manager.

“By engaging others in the causal model development or review process, you will ensure that everyone sees the project through a similar lens. This is a critical component of the learning environment that value chain projects need in order to succeed.”

If you have not used CARE’s process to design your project and do not have a causal model, you will need to collect all key design documents including the tools you used to help define your goal, the market constraints you seek to overcome, and your interventions. You will want to have clear explanations available for why you made decisions at each step in the design process.

**People:** Whether you are developing your initial causal model or reviewing and refining a causal model developed during program design, this process is best completed as a participatory exercise. You will
want to engage field staff, the project manager, program managers, key partner staff and possibly partners in your process. By engaging others in the causal model development or review process you will ensure that everyone sees the project through a similar lens. This is a critical component of the learning environment that value chain projects need in order to succeed.

D. Step-By-Step Guide

**STEP 1: STRUCTURE YOUR CAUSAL MODEL**

Causal Models are deliberately flexible in order to accommodate a wide range of potential projects and interventions. The Causal Model presented in this guide, however, provides a structure that has been tested within CARE and appears particularly well suited for CARE value chain projects. The model establishes four core domains of impact:

- **Impacts**: Impacts sit at the top of the causal model in the *Household Domain* – The household domain refers to changes anticipated within the households of IG members and among IG members themselves. Ultimately, the goal of all value chain projects is to contribute to sustainable, scalable poverty reduction, women’s empowerment and improved livelihoods among IG member households.

- **Outcomes**: In order to clearly illustrate the outcomes the project will directly and indirectly yield, effects are divided across three distinct domains:
  
  o **Enterprise Domain** – The enterprise domain refers to outcomes anticipated in the knowledge, skills, attitudes, actions and performance of value chain actors and support services providers with which the project is directly engaged. The results listed here are therefore often a direct result of the project’s actions.
  
  o **Sector Domain** – The sector domain refers to changes in the value chains and markets involved that go beyond the actors on which the project is directly focused. The results listed here are often indirect outcomes of the project’s activities and, therefore, the result of copying or crowding in.
  
  o **Women’s Empowerment and Gender Equity Domain** – This domain is cross-cutting and typically closely aligned with outcomes in the enterprise and sector domains. It is separated out to ensure projects fully consider how their interventions will advance women’s empowerment and gender equality – and that they have a clear plan for achieving these.

From the bottom to the top, your causal model should be designed to present the following information:

- **Underlying assumptions** – Each line in your causal model represents an assumption. This is the logical link between one step and another along your causal pathway. The causal model format provides a space for teams to list the most critical assumptions underpinning the project’s design.

- **Interventions** – These are the activities your project will undertake.

- **Outputs** – These are the immediate results of the interventions. Projects have nearly complete control over the achievement of outputs.

- **Leading outcomes** – These are the short-term changes implementers expect to see as a result of the outputs. Leading outcomes are often preliminary changes in participant knowledge, attitudes and practices – often called “KAPs” – that ultimately lead to longer-term changes in enterprise and sector performance or women’s empowerment and gender equality. In value chain projects, which need to
be acutely aware of shifts in IG, TG or Client behavior or interest in the intervention, leading outcomes are particularly important to identify clearly and in a participatory manner. As discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, leading outcomes are often monitored through informal processes, relying on staff observation and limited surveying to help projects make adjustments.

- Lagging outcomes – These are medium-term changes that implementers expect to see as a result of leading outcomes. Lagging outcomes are often tangible changes that result from changes in KAPs.

- Impacts – The long-term changes that will show if you have achieved your ultimate goal. These are typically monitored using formal methods and incorporated into project baseline studies and final evaluations. As noted above, for most projects, impacts are measured in terms of improvements in the lives of IG members.

In developing causal models, teams should focus on ensuring the model is detailed, logical and realistic and that the final product provides a clear summary of the project’s intent and expectations for change.

**STEP 2: DRAW YOUR CAUSAL MODEL**

For projects that do not yet have a causal model, a simple way to create one is to follow these basic steps:

1. Begin by drawing boxes for the pieces of the model you have most clearly articulated:
   - Use your purpose and goal statements to fill out the top of the model.
   - Use your assumptions and risk manager to fill out the key assumptions.
   - Use your interventions table to fill out the interventions level. If more than one intervention will be undertaken, you will need to draw a separate box for each intervention and use arrows to show the relationship between them.

   Typical questions to ask are:
   a. Does one intervention lead to another or will they be undertaken at the same time?
   b. Do they all target the same market actors or do they target different actors?
   c. Do they all aim to produce one specific change in the value chain or are they aimed at different changes?

   The causal model does not need to show every detail of the Interventions e.g. preparatory meetings and other interventions. In developing your causal model, it is helpful though to include a brief description of each intervention. So, for an agricultural project you may have categories such as production upgrading, community mobilization and market development with descriptions, such as:

   - Production Upgrading: Develop and test business models with existing service providers for increasing extension, credit, and input provision targeting female producers.
   - Community Mobilization: Work with community associations to design and roll out increased services for HIV/AIDS-affected households.
Market Development: Conduct business management skill training for market information providers and enhance links to intermediaries to ensure information is accurate, reliable and accessible to producers, both women and men.

The goal is to be concise but clear.

Lastly, define the outputs you expect to emerge as a direct, immediate result of your interventions. These are typically quite concrete and countable. For instance, if you plan to train smallholders, your output would be that smallholders have been trained. If you plan to facilitate market linkages by conducting seed fairs with multiple market actors, your output may be the number of fairs held or the number of participants.

With your assumptions, interventions, outputs and goals articulated, you now need to articulate the “causal pathways” connecting these by describing the main changes expected to result from project interventions over the course of your project. This is the point at which design teams need to think critically about your expected results across multiple domains. As noted above, most value chain projects should at least consider the following domains at the outcome level:

- Direct, Enterprise Level
- Indirect, Sector Level
- Cross-Cutting / Women’s Empowerment and Gender Equity.

Household-level results may be included at the outcome level as well, but are often more appropriately listed at the highest level of the causal model – impacts.

In defining your anticipated outcomes, you will likely make a number of adjustments, developing potential outcomes and then changing them. This is natural and an important part of the process, so do not get frustrated. You will want to have your innovations table, your problem tree and your risk management matrix handy as you identify the outcomes.

From here, you can construct your causal model in many ways. Perhaps the most straightforward method is to proceed intervention by intervention.

Drawing from your interventions table and your problem tree, look at your outputs related to the first intervention. What key changes do you expect these to yield over the life of the project? Among these, which will come first? These changes will be categorized as your leading outcomes. Add boxes for these outcomes in the leading outcomes section and then draw arrows linking them to specific outputs. Questions to ask as you do this include:

- Does this change contribute directly to improving the performance of producers or other market actors? If so, it will fall in the enterprise domain. If not, does it contribute indirectly to improving the sector?
- Does this change contribute to increased gender equity or women’s empowerment? If so, you may want to create a box in the cross-cutting women’s empowerment domain to show what specific changes you anticipate around this issue.

Note that outputs frequently lead to outcomes across multiple domains, e.g., women’s empowerment and enterprise-level outcomes, or outcomes among multiple actors, e.g., seed fairs may have outcomes among both

Note: Focusing on Gender

Projects have found that when expectations for advancing women’s empowerment or gender equity are embedded in other elements of the causal model, they are often overlooked. By breaking these expected effects out into their own section of the causal model, projects and others can more clearly see what is expected – enhancing performance and accountability.
farmers and seed supply companies. It is important to outline the outcomes you expect on multiple market actors in your causal model.

With leading outcomes in place for the first intervention, look at the gap that remains in your causal model between these and your anticipated impacts. Again drawing on our interventions table and problem tree, assess what changes you anticipate filling this gap. These will become your lagging outcomes.

Note that frequently, indirect, sector level impacts only appear at this level and result from the demonstration effect of successful interventions in the enterprise domain. In addition, in some cases, there might be two layers of outcomes at the lagging level – for instance, increased productivity leading to increased profits. The important thing to focus on in your causal model is ensuring the diagram is accurate, not how many boxes or linkages you have.

Add the boxes you feel are necessary for your lagging outcomes and draw arrows linking them to your leading outcomes and anticipated impacts.

Once you have completed this for one intervention and you are satisfied with the causal pathway, go back and complete this for each intervention you have planned. As you do this, note that in many cases, multiple interventions will contribute to the same outcomes – in fact, ultimately they will all converge to contribute to the project goal. Wherever you can, try to streamline your causal model so it is clear how outcomes converge as time goes on.

3. Finally, review your goal and develop impact results that capture the long-term changes in and around the value chain that will occur as a result of the project. For many value chain projects, these will include: increased income among the poor; increased competitiveness of the value chain; and, when focusing on women’s empowerment, something defining the impact you are aiming for. For example, increased integration of rural women into a market system resulting in higher incomes and improved household nutrition. As discussed in Chapter 4, CARE has defined a set of common indicators at the impact level for all value chain projects.

You will need to develop specific anticipated impacts based on your goal statement and the causal pathways linking your interventions to your outcomes.

**STEP 3: VERIFY CAUSAL PATHWAYS AND FINALIZE CAUSAL MODEL**

Once you have developed causal pathways for each of your interventions, take a step back and review the causal model as a whole. This process will allow you to ensure that your final model truly reflects the project you aim to undertake and is realistic and appropriate. Some key questions to ask at this stage include:
- Is the project goal and purpose still aligned with your initial intention?
- Is the causal model thorough, logical and realistic, showing as far as possible how the selected interventions will create significant impact?
- Are the solutions tailored to the constraints faced by project enterprises in reaching identified markets?
- Does the sum of interventions or results at each step in the causal pathway logically flow into the achievement of the next?
- Do we have evidence from our design process to support the linkages all along the causal model?

**Note: Verifying Your Model**

Verifying the causal model is often a good opportunity to re engage with clients that have fed into the project design process. This effort can both ensure your logic is valid and demonstrate to clients how your thinking has evolved and what you have done with their input. This is a very good opportunity to engage potential project participants in your design process.
- Are there conditions that have not been considered and need to be added as an assumption or a risk?
- Can we effectively manage the project we are proposing?

This list is illustrative but should provide teams with a good minimum set of requirements for the causal model. Once you feel you have sufficiently addressed these and made any necessary changes, you can move to your final step in project design.

**STEP 4: DOCUMENT YOUR WORK**

Having fully outlined your project’s causal model, the last step in the design process is to formalize this in a way that is understandable both to internal and to external clients. This will mean the development of a formal version of the causal model.

As noted above, the causal model can take many forms. Some projects prefer to use a table to consolidate this information, but others feel that the graphical presentation of the project more clearly illustrates how the project components contribute to the ultimate impacts. We recommend that projects use the template outlined above to organize their information and augment this with a clear, brief project narrative. Microsoft PowerPoint, Visio, and Word are all typical software options used to develop causal model diagrams. Photographs may be another way of illustrating a causal model, particularly to internal audiences. Alternatively, projects may opt to use a simpler format in a table developed in Microsoft Word or Excel.
E. Case Example

The causal model below illustrates is taken from a fictitious case study and illustrates how the planned interventions lead to outputs, leading and lagging outcomes and finally impacts. Note that the three columns at the outcome level reflect cross-cutting / women’s empowerment outcomes on the left in red, direct, enterprise-level outcomes and indirect, sector-level outcomes.

F. Common Pitfalls

- **Being inflexible or forcing teams to adopt any particular model will undermine this exercise.** The importance of working with the team to develop or review the causal model together is not that you arrive at any particular format – it is that you get to a point at which you can all agree on how your activities are to lead to your outcomes and impacts. So, focus on generating agreement among the group rather than alignment with your own ideas.

- **Allowing important issues or anticipated results to ‘fall off’ the model.** Sometimes, it is complicated for the group to clearly illustrate how you expect a particular result to emerge. Choosing to ignore this rather than working through the conversation to reach agreement is a potentially fatal flaw for your model.
G. Templates and Supporting Materials

1. How to use your causal model to develop a logframe.

Many donors will require that you include a ‘logical framework’ in your final proposal and many organizations use this as a foundation for their project designs. Despite this, logical frameworks are frequently criticized as being overly linear, poorly applied and infrequently used. The reasons for this and the validity of the arguments against logical frameworks have been greatly discussed in development circles and, for those wanting more information, a quick internet search will bring up any number of resources or debates.

The purpose of this addendum is not, however, to make a judgment on logframes. This addendum outlines:

- What a logical framework is,
- The terms used by different donor agencies for elements of the logical framework,
- How design teams can translate their final causal model into any number of logical framework formats used by various donor agencies.

A recent review\(^1\) found that “when people speak of the logical framework, they are referring to a matrix with both:

i) a vertical logic as a hierarchy of objectives – activities deliver outputs, which contribute to outcomes, which help bring about the overall goal;

ii) a horizontal logic showing how progress against each objective can be assessed (indicators and means of verification) and the external factors (assumptions and risks) which might affect whether the reaching of the objectives will contribute to the next level.”

Within this basic format, many donor agencies and NGOs that use logical frameworks have developed somewhat different terms for the various elements of the matrix. The table below outlines some of these distinctions.

As the “Logframe Rosetta Stone” demonstrates, the adaptations to logical frameworks are multiple with different agencies requiring different categorization.

By contrast, causal models, particularly those for internal purposes, can take the form that is most useful to the design and implementation team. Once a causal model is articulated, teams can follow these steps to translate the model into any number of logical framework formats:

1. Identify the categories the donor is using and line these up with the categories you have used in your causal model – see the bottom row of the Rosetta Stone table (pg. 26-27) for an illustration of how to do this. This will almost certainly require trade-offs as donors use different categories.

2. Transfer your interventions, outputs, leading and lagging outcomes and impacts to the preferred donor format.

3. Review your assumptions and see where they are best positioned within the logframe. You will also likely need to articulate additional causal assumptions as you go through this process to show how each link in the chain is validated.

4. The next step requires teams to go beyond their work in the design process so far by identifying indicators and targets associated with each result – outputs, outcomes and impacts. It is strongly recommended that to complete this process, you work in partnership with a skilled monitoring and evaluation advisor to ensure the indicators and targets selected are practical, will serve the goals of the implementation team, and meet accountability requirements to the donor and project participants. Once these are presented to a donor, they often become increasingly difficult to adjust. The CARE Guidelines on M&E System Design for Value Chain Initiatives (forthcoming) is a reliable source of information on

\(^1\) The Use and Abuse of the Logical Framework Approach, SIDA, NOVEMBER 2005 • OLIVER BAKEWELL & ANNE GARBUJT
completing this process. The DCED Standards for Results Measurement Implementation Guide is another good resource.

5. Finally, once you have completely filled out the logframe template, review the full table and be sure to compare it to your original causal model. Does the logframe table effectively include the most important aspects of the causal model? Are there any areas where the logframe appears to go beyond the initial causal model? If so, the team should review these to adjust the logframe to ensure it reflects the project design.
### COMPARISONS BETWEEN TERMINOLOGIES OF DIFFERENT DONOR AGENCIES for RESULTS / LOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

Adapted from original compiled by Jim Rugh for CARE International and InterAction’s Evaluation Interest Group

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<th>Needs-based</th>
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<th>End Outcomes</th>
<th>Intermediate Outcomes</th>
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<sup>1</sup> CARE Impact Guidelines, October 1999.
<sup>2</sup> MEDA Program Design for Value Chain Initiatives Toolkit, 2007
<sup>3</sup> PC/LogFrame (tm) 1988-1992 TEAM technologies, Inc.
<sup>4</sup> Results Oriented Assistance Sourcebook, USAID, 1998.
<sup>8</sup> ZOPP in Steps. 1989.
<sup>9</sup> Project Cycle Management: Integrated Approach and Logical Framework, Commission of the European Communities Evaluation Unit Methods and Instruments for Project Cycle Management, No. 1, February 1993
<sup>10</sup> Project Appraisal and the Use of Project Document Formats for FAO Technical Cooperation Projects. Pre-Course Activity: Revision of Project Formulation and Assigned Reading. Staff Development Group, Personnel Division, August 1992
<sup>11</sup> UNDP Policy and Program Manual
<sup>14</sup> AusAID NGO Package of Information, 1998
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3. Value Chain M&E Causal Model Template

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