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Want to assess system change? Just get started



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All blogs

Are you hesitating to assess system change?

It may seem like waiting will allow you to formulate the ideal approach. But you're missing an opportunity now that will help you adjust your strategy to the uncertain and fast-changing situation, improve your interventions and report more effectively.

While there are valid reasons for feeling stuck, every programme can assess system change. How? Just get started.

Start with a practical focus

Rather than agonising over the design of your system change assessment approach, start with a practical focus: what do you need to know about how the market system your programme targets is changing in order adjust your strategy?

Take small steps to gather – and use – that information. Then you can build on those initial steps as needed.

What are the wider influences from your interventions?

As a field, we've made some progress. Many programmes are assessing wider influences from interventions.

For example, are similar businesses copying some of the changes in partners' business models? Are other market actors reacting to new ways of working

introduced by programme partners or changes in target group demands? Are new connections forming among market actors related to an intervention? How many more target group members are getting a new or better service promoted by an intervention?

A practical description of this ‘intervention lens’ can be found in [A pragmatic approach to assessing system change](#).

Use a ‘helicopter lens’ as well as an ‘intervention lens’

If your programme is using an intervention lens to track wider influence, that’s great! If not, start now. Either way, it’s time to also take a bigger picture look at how the system your programme targets is changing by using a ‘[helicopter lens](#)’.

Market systems are constantly changing, particularly in times of turmoil such as we are experiencing now. You need to know:

- Is your programme still focused on the right support markets to promote overall change in the main market system you target?
- Are there new opportunities to encourage change towards your goals?
- What new risks and constraints have emerged that your programme should address?

Widening your view to identify key changes in the market system your programme targets and what’s driving them will help you to adapt your overall strategy.

You’ve likely done this before, when you [diagnosed the situation](#) in the market system to inform programme design. You probably asked: what is happening in the market system, how and why? Use these same questions to guide system change assessment during a programme:

- What has changed in the market system?
- How has it changed?
- Why has it changed?

For example, a programme aims to help smallholder farmers get more income from maize farming by selling more maize and getting higher prices for higher quality maize. The programme focuses on hybrid seeds and related good agricultural practices, and improved post-harvest handling. To understand how and why the maize system relevant to smallholder farmers in the targeted location is changing, the programme might ask:

- How is the volume and quality of maize being sold from the area changing? Why?

- › To what extent, how and why are maize buyers and maize input suppliers targeting women and men smallholder farmers as suppliers and customers?
- › How are women and men farmers' perceptions of maize for subsistence and income changing? Why?

So, how can your programme get started?

Here are some tips from experience on the ground:

Set yourself up for success

- › Define the boundaries of a market system you can realistically influence - considering target group, geography and which interconnected systems are included.
- › In your strategy, outline clearly and concisely what changes the programme aims to influence in the main and interconnected systems it targets.

Keep it manageable

- › Start with questions on what you need to know – rather than indicators. It's more intuitive and it helps to make sure the information you get is information you'll use.
- › Based on the questions, define a few indicators that will help to understand if and how the main system and the supporting systems your programme targets are changing. Don't overdo it; 5-7 indicators with a mix of quantitative and qualitative information per system is plenty.
- › Forget about how your interventions are contributing initially – start by understanding what is changing and why. This is valuable information for adjusting your strategy. Once you've got information on why changes are happening, you can start exploring how the drivers of change may link to programme interventions.

Build on your current monitoring and results measurement system

- › Start by integrating information gathering on system change into your usual monitoring. For example, when you're monitoring interventions by talking with your partner and other market actors, add a few broader questions about changes and trends in the market system.
- › Apply your insights to adapt your strategy during your next regular review and planning session. Take time during the session to step away from interventions and analyse the overall system itself.
- › Report what changes are happening and why. More can be added later on if and how the changes link to interventions.

Above all, **don't try to assess system change perfectly**. Good now is better than perfect later. See what works well and build your approach to assessing system change one small improvement at a time.

You've got this. Just get started.

Related blog:

- Hans Posthumus and Nabanita Sen Bekkers blog: [Defining and assessing market system resilience: demystification is needed](#)

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