**Notes from TOPS M&E Task Force Meeting**

**July 7, 2016**

**Participants**

* Jose “TD” Thekkiniath, CRS/ Nairobi
* Jay Vasudevan CRS Malawi
* Imee Cambronero, Save the Children
* Diana Stukel, FANTA/ FHI 360
* Sujata Bose, FANTA/ FHI 360
* Meghan Bolden, Save the Children
* Denis Tiren, FANTA/ FHI 360
* Lauren Jessup, TOPS
* Laurie Starr, TOPS

**AGENDA**

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| **Introductions & Updates** | 9:00 – 9:05 |
| **Discussion: What are best practices in linking the project theory of change to M&E systems?**   * Define what needs to be linked? What needs to be in place to link? * Constraints and enablers * Gaps in existing guidance to linking project ToC to M&E system.   **How can the ME TF contribute to documenting and disseminating best practices in linking the project theory of change to M&E systems?** | 9:05 – 9:30 |
| **Discussion:**  **FFP’s Draft policy and guidance for M&E, and reporting for DFAPs**   * Review questions/ comments submitted by TF members. * Determine if TF has consensus on these comments. * Determine best approach to fill identified gaps. | 9:30-9:50 |
| **Close** | 9:50-10:00 |

**NOTES**

Notes are not verbatim. Due to the back and forth between those speaking over the phone and those typing in the chat box, some of the discussion has been re-ordered to allow for a more logical flow of dialogue.

**Introduction / Updates**

Laurie: **Knowledge and sharing meeting, Kampala Uganda Sept 20-22.**

Edith and I are organizing three M&E sessions and are searching for interesting speakers outside of TOPS.

* Refine and Implement
* Hope to have expert from FFP talking about the R&I process from an M&E perspective and perhaps share insights from the first round of proposals that attempted to respond to this new model.
* Regional speakers from DRC to talk about their own fresh experiences responding to this new model.
* New use of M&E methodologies in DFAPS (TD will be participating on panel. We’re looking for other folks to add value to the session)
* Routine monitoring
* TOC 2 years in - successes and challenges in using TOC as integral part of M&E system
* Other ideas?
* Qualitative skills and sampling for qualitative research
  + Brief capacity development session.

DIANA: Recommend that TOPS invite someone from CARE Mali, because they got converted to an R&I model after the initial proposal was submitted, but they are versed in rolling it out.

IMEE: Timing may not be great. Mali DFAPs have not yet completed M&E basic training. That is scheduled for October. By the time of Sept K&S meeting, assessments might be finished, but project would only be in initial stages.

DIANA: May be more versed than anyone out there.

LAURIE: Would love to get more suggestions from the TF about colleagues in this region who might be willing to speak about these topics, and who have the experience and skills to do so. Re: qualitative session: Edith is based in Uganda now and states there is high demand for improving qualitative skills in that region. Session still under development. If TF has any suggestions about specific qualitative skills to focus on, let me know. These skills are so important, even if teams are not conducting the research themselves, but are overseeing MTEs, need to be on the lookout for good practices [have an opinion about the strength/utility of methods proposed by hired evaluators].

**4-day TOC training in Uganda** **following Knowledge and Sharing Meeting. September 26-29.**

Applications will be available soon.

Workshop will be similar to past TOC workshops, but it has evolved immensely over the last couple of years. Revised facilitator guide and workshop materials (slides, handouts, worksheets) available very soon on the FSN. Has been substantially refined to better align to FFP preferences.

IMEE: Heard from Edith, who was talking to Barbara Reed about another topic for an add on session planned for Kampala?

LAURIE: That has not been yet confirmed. Barbara is considering offering a one-day session of guidance and examples of setting targets for FFP and custom indicators. I don’t have any more information other than it is an idea being tossed around.

GROUP: consensus that this is a fabulous idea.

TD: Yes, Great idea. So far we don’t have clear guidance on setting targets with exception of FTF website for very selective indicators. But not in general, how to set targets for impact and outcome indicators, which is a requirement not only for FFP, but for all donors.

LAURIE: Acknowledging that we always want to get things to the field, as I mentioned at the last ME TF, I plan to conduct a series of very short capacity development sessions in DC (with remote participation). Is [setting targets for indicators] a topic that would be of similar interest to DC staff?

IMEE: Yes, and any type of recording that could be shared would be very helpful.

LAURIE: Maybe TOPS can work with Barbara to develop a webinar/ recording.

**Last item in updates**

LAURIE: **Knowledge exchange** I’d really like to get knowledge exchange flowing via our TF listserve. The Gender TF offers great, regular updates on new tools, events, job postings, cutting-edge articles. Not high tech, or slicky formatted, but it is regular! So nice to get bundle of gender-related information in one shot, that is sourced from many organizations/ many countries.

I’d like to do the same for M&E. Send me your news. I will compile it and send out at TBD routine increments.

**Discussion: What are best practices in linking the project theory of change to M&E systems?**

LAURIE: Picking up from the last TF meeting. To identify best practices in linking a project TOC to M&E systems, last month the TF first explored: *What needs to be linked between the TOC and M&E systems? What needs to be in place to create these linkages? What are constraints and enablers to linkages? What are gaps in existing guidance showing practitioners how to link the TOC to M&E systems?*

Bullets below are the practices identified last month. These can be expanded on in more discussion, and ultimately we want to decide what will we do with this information? Develop a short guidance document to share? How will we disseminate the information?

Several TF members expand on these ideas:

* **Use TOC to help identify evidence gaps**
  + **TD:** When we are developing the causal pathways in a TOC, we need to be able to show the rationale for how that pathway will work, and the evidence to show the pathway will work. My experience working with a DFAP design is that often you cannot find evidence for a good number of pathways, because available research does not cover the causation. That is a challenge. The TOC highlights where there are evidence gaps. Well-linked M&E systems should work out a plan to fill the gaps through primary data collection.
* **Invest in formative research months before a proposal is due to be able to inform the development of the TOC and to provide the proposal writers with sufficient evidence to make a convincing case.** 
  + **Laurie:** This is particularly important to understand within the new Refine and Implement model. R&I does not substitute doing good solid research so that you can develop a strong TOC. You have to be able to provide enough evidence to present a convincing case initially, and then refine the TOC as the project continues.
* **Involve ~~implementing~~ country staff in initial design process/ creation of TOC.** 
  + **Laurie:** TF wants to highlight that this is a must. Staff need to be involved in the creation. It is more efficient and more effective. We know the amount of work that goes into creating TOCs, if it gets completely turned around because the people who should have been there in the first place have many new ideas, that’s not the best use of time. In the last TF meeting we talked about how in early DFAP experiences, people were designing a program and then making a TOC to fit the program. I think we all understand that that is not how TOC is intended to be used, FFP certainly knows this--but this was the practice in the early stages as we tried to get the TOC ball rolling [when proposals did not include one and it was necessary to create one after the fact]. As new projects are awarded, the TOC development should happen first, it should be the foundation for project design.
  + **DIANA:** I wonder whether one of the reasons implementing staff are not involved in TOC creation is because they have not been hired yet. Sometimes at proposal stage, whoever is in HQ or consultants put the TOC together, and then later on implementing staff in field inherit it. I don’t think this is an intentional omission, it is just sometimes reality.
  + **LAURIE:** Maybe it was my note-taking. Perhaps we mean local staff, rather than implementing staff. Sense from last TF meeting was that local staff were not always consulted on the TOC. Country office staff need to be involved, particularly to help with the lower tiers of the TOC. Let’s work on refining how we want to describe this best practice.
* **Ensure differing data collection systems for different project purposes.**
  + **DIANA:** This is an unexplored area and may be casually brushed under the rug in a lot of M&E systems. You can map out the TOC in a schematic and overlay all the FFP baseline/ final evaluation indicators, FFP annual monitoring indicators, and add project-specific indicators where there are gaps. One observation, is near the top of the TOC as you get closer to the goals, there are more high impact indicators, generally collected through BL and final evaluations. Increasingly it seems that FFP is professionalizing, overseeing and outsourcing the data gathering for that end. As you move toward the lower end of the TOC you might see more annual monitoring indicators. This is where implementing partners have a responsibility on an annual basis to collect data. This is where there is more choice in differing data collection systems. For some indicators, or even groups of indicators that belong in sectors, you might use routine monitoring, for others you might use beneficiary-based surveys, and you could even use project records for some indicators, and for others, government or other secondary sources (e.g. GDP). When you look at the FFP indicators that can be overlaid on the TOC there is a sectoral aspect. Often the data collection mechanisms for distinct sectors cannot be the same, because the beneficiaries are not the same and they don’t overlap. There needs to be more thought for the different indicators that are layered onto the TOC, like looking at each indicator and thinking about what is the best system to collect each indicator and of course balancing that with not having too many systems that overburden staff. That could be an interesting topic for the methodologies session at the K&S Uganda workshop. It struck me as I was drafting the beneficiary-based survey guides that that guide is not appropriate for many indicators which need to be collected. Other different systems need to be construed.
* **More data *analysis* to test TOC causation using inferential statistics, not just by descriptive statistics complemented with qualitative research** 
  + **DIANA:** I wonder about this one. Because IPs are more regulated to collect annual monitoring data and there is an outsourcing of the higher level indicators. Who will do this analysis? Is it the 3rd party contractors who will do it? I’m assuming this causation analysis would happen closer to the end of the project? Or is it the implementing partners themselves who do it, accessing public data files from the 3rd party contractors, in tandem with all their annual monitoring. A discussion on who does this analysis would be of interest.
* **Feed information from Stakeholder Analysis into TOC development. Conduct periodic M&E check to see that the stakeholder conditions and resources that your assumptions rest on are still in place.** 
  + **LAURIE:** TOCs are set up to include other actors who are producing outcomes that are necessary for the success of a pathway of change, or sometimes whole theories of change. As such, stakeholders analyses have to come back into vogue. Really solid stakeholders’ analyses that we check in on and we know who is doing what, are they doing it well? And how long will they be doing it? Because if an outcome produced by another actor will not achieved, that gear stops spinning mid-program and your theory of change may no longer hold.
* **Conduct a conscious annual review of the TOC based on collected data.** 
  + **TD:** A requirement is to review the TOC periodically, at least annually. So far that has not happened. So far we just check our performance targets for year 1 or year 2. We never look at whether the causal pathways in the TOC are achieved or not. This requires a new way of looking at data. We need to enhance staff competency in this area. Based on evidence, we might have to revise the pathways or even drop some pathways, if evidence to support them is not there. But the most important thing is to have the competency to do this sort of analysis to review the TOC. In some projects we have reviewed causation at the final stage, but not on an annual basis.
  + **IMEE:** In one of my existing programs, we were doing the annual review of the TOC in relation to the ARR, but team discussions [Nepal SABAL] revealed that the appropriate time to review the TOC is alongside/ in advance of the PREP. We have not implemented this yet, but the team is thinking about it as it relates to activities, as it relates to prioritizing and sequencing as well.
* **Use TOC to develop efficient sequencing for the DIP.** 
  + **LAURIE:** High value use. An area where TOCs are not yet widely used. It’s so effective to use the bottom tier ---FFP now require projects to put outputs in the TOC---to tell you what to do first. It helps you define the steps that need to set those gears in motion.

Laurie: How do we plan to flesh out these best practices? We’ve got a foundation. Do we circulate a document for collective contribution?

Meghan: We already have at least three documents that have been produced on TOCs—the technical references from USAID, the draft FFP M&E policy and guidance, some stuff in the M&E facilitator guide that Edith circulated 6 months ago, and all of them have at least 3-8 pages about how to do this. This now becomes a 4th reference. So anything we develop should be short—a one or two pager.

Imee: Could one of the existing documents be updated?

Laurie: Agree that short is good. But don’t think that any of the existing guidance discusses these points. Existing guidance mentioned is very concrete. It is focused on how to develop a TOC but doesn’t take it any further. Even the comprehensive TANGO/TOPS guidance doesn’t talk about all of these points. The best practices this TF is trying to share relate to firmly linking the TOC to the M&E system.

Sujata: I agree that the FFP guidance is not as detailed - not sure about the other materials.

Laurie: I’m guessing that the TOC guidance in the Draft M&E Policy and Guidance will be updated to match the Technical References. The chapters are an evolution and offer many clarifications that do not exist in the Sept. 2015 M&E draft.

Diana: Would it be useful to create a document and then make a case to FFP to eventually integrate it into the Policy and Guidance document so that A) we don’t have a proliferation of documents floating around and B) it becomes formalized.

TF agrees: Yes. TF role should be to help FFP set policy.

Dr. T D Jose, CRS: Do you know by when the FFP MER policy and guide would be finalized?

Sujata: FANTA has been helping FFP with that document. I understand that FFP is planning to send us the finalized version for editing within the next couple of weeks. I assume it will be finalized within the next 3 months or so. Just a reminder that that document, although it contains a little bit of guidance, I think it is more heavily weighted toward the policy end, in terms of what they want to include. So [re: revisions], the timeline may not work because they are trying to finalize the document right now, unless you want to get this information into later versions of the document. Also there might be some hesitancy to include things that are clearly in the guidance realm.

Imee: [TOPS] is doing a TOC facilitators’ guide?

Laurie: The facilitators’ guide is for the 5-day training and it does provide guidance on how to develop a TOC, and the new last chapter is how to integrate a TOC into the program cycle.

Imee: Maybe that might be the best place for [these best practices].

Laurie: Whatever we produce can certainly be integrated into the TOPS guidance, but I think Diana has a good point that whatever we come up with we should make a case to FFP to try to get it formalized.

Imee: My concern is the timing. If I’m correct, the 2015 DFAPs are the first to incorporate the TOC, so they are currently finishing up YR 2 of programming, starting YR3. From my experience, I’ve learned a great deal but I’m still learning a lot. I think we can probably make recommendations [on best practices], but I think especially after the midterm evaluation which is happening in YR 3, that’s where I think we’re really going to be able to add additional meat on these recommendations.

Sujata: It might be that the 2014 programs (Madagascar, Burundi etc.) were the first batch that had to include the TOC, so we’ve got a few more years of data at hand.

**Next steps:**

Laurie commits to pulling starter document together and circulating to TF for input. TF members will select specific points they wish to elaborate on. We’ll continue to add practices as they are identified and discussed. Using chart presented at first TF might be helpful. Mapping out *What needs to be linked between TOC and MLE systems? How to link—what needs to be in place? What are constraints and enablers to linking TOC & MLE systems?*

**Discussion: FFP’s Draft policy and guidance for M&E, and reporting for DFAPs**

* Review questions/ comments submitted by TF members.
* Determine if TF has consensus on these comments.
* Determine best approach to fill identified gaps.

Laurie: Remember FFP is close to finalizing, so not sure how much we can influence this version. I hope many of you sent your comments in last year. These could be recommendations for the next draft.

* *Though the title of the guide includes “reporting” it* ***covers only reporting of evaluation events of baseline, MTE and FE, not on progress and annual results reports*** *such as SAPR and ARR which is a critical element to be included in this guide.*
  + Sujata: From FFP perspective there might have been some hesitancy to include a lot of detail on ARR reporting, for example, because there is already a separate document addressing that. I believe the current guide includes a link to that document.
  + No TF consensus that this bullet is a critical concern.
  + Meghan: There were a lot of best practices discussed last year at the Gender Analysis workshop on how to improve ARRs that I haven't seen incorporated in anything.
* *The annual monitoring strategy addresses monitoring implementation of project activities and their outputs, but* ***does not include “food commodity distribution and post-distribution monitoring”****which I think is a critical element of annual monitoring.*
  + Sujata: FFP does plan to include these two topics in the upcoming guidance for emergency projects. But I cannot tell you when that document would become available.
  + Laurie: In the future when document is updated, are we in agreement that it will be sufficient to provide a link to further detail?
  + TD: We have food distribution in DFAPs as well, not only in emergency responses. Will the emergency guidance be sufficient for situations such as FFW, unconditional distribution, conditional distribution?
  + Sujata: I do know FFP is in discussion right now on what are the recommendations for post-distribution monitoring related to emergency programs, but it might be they need to work through these discussions before they have anything to recommend for either emergency or development programs, and that will take some time, so I don’t think this topic will get into the current round, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t continue to lobby for it to be included in the next iteration of development guidance.
  + TD: That is OK, as long as there is momentum and agreement to address this issue, because it is an issue.
  + Diana: I also wonder if the issue of food commodity distribution and post-distribution monitoring has quite different ramifications in emergency settings as compared to development settings. To me PDM is completely different in the two settings. In development you have the luxury of time, you have connection with your beneficiaries. In emergency it is more fragmented. Maybe we can’t answer this question until the emergency guidance is developed, but it may or may not be sufficient for a development setting.
  + Jay: In emergencies sometimes the food is distribution only once or twice, but in development it might be a commodity that is distributed for 6 months or more. The beneficiaries are not mobile or they are mostly confined to a geographic area where the project is operating. So the approaches, like what percentage has to be verified, will be different for the two settings.
  + Meghan: Sujata, you may want to consider a link to the beneficiary based sampling guide in the Draft policy guidance as well.

Laurie: To all who submitted the questions for discussion this week, because there is not going to be a lot we can influence between now and the time the guide is published, I’m wondering, in the essence of time if starting early and having a very organized, regular focus on our recommendations for how to improve the ME policy/ guidance document for the next update might be a more productive use of TF time? We could then really refine our points, bring in the documents we know exist, we can explore gaps, we can advocate for why we need more guidance in areas.

Group agreement.

Jay: Only thing that needs to be very clear is that if there are changes coming to the document, we have to know for which projects the changes are applicable. Is guidance only relevant to new DFAPs and upcoming ones, or it is applicable to current ones and then how will that affect systems already in place?

**Closing remarks**

Imee: Wondering if anybody out there might have some suggestions for a few things I’ve been working on. 1) Working with the team on how to identify good and specific MTE questions and a narrow SOW. 2) Harmonizing tools for DQA, and 3) how to conduct an annual survey with multiple populations for example, ag. and livelihoods, health and nutrition. Three topics where I am interested in talking with others to learn how to give the best support to the country offices. If anyone has some good examples, or is also working through these areas, I would love to collaborate and share ideas.

Laurie: If you have outreach ideas like this, send them in to me and I will add to the bi-weekly update that goes out through the listserve. Let’s use [the newsletter] as a way to connect to each other on topics that we may be struggling through on our own.

**Group prefers 1.5 hour meeting in future and bi-monthly. Next meeting will be held in early September.**

For now people prefer one consolidated mailing (compiled by Laurie) vs. everyone sending contributions directly to entire listserve on whim. We can revisit in the future.