

Structured Scan 02

General Observations from MSP structured scans

Structured Scan 01: An overview of 38 MSP structured scans

Structured Scans 02: General Observations

Structured Scan 03: The Methodology



Evidence for MS Platforms

enhancing the effectiveness of
multi-stakeholder platforms in agrifood

Why and how to assess MSP effectiveness

The complex challenges that the food and agriculture sector faces due to rapidly changing global demands and pressures calls for new, more effective responses. In response, over the past 10-15 years increasing effort has gone into collaborative action through multistakeholder platforms (MSPs), as many critical problems cannot be solved by a single actor. There is a matching need to say something about how these platforms contribute to inclusive and sustainable development, and to design better ways of assessing a platform's effectiveness.

MSPs often have broad goals, such as increased food productivity or reduced nutrition. Their pathways to change mean they are set up to create the conditions that stimulate and enable on-the-ground action. These indirect contributions to intended changes at household or field level makes it very hard to attribute impacts to their activities and outputs. Many MSPs struggle to gather relevant and credible evidence and build plausible narratives of the effectiveness of their activities, which can inform strategy or investment decisions. Naturally, platforms do need to demonstrate their added value to members and funders. Regrettably, proof of value is often equated with detailed (quantitative) impact data while evidence of intermediate results related, for example, to behaviour change or to resource mobilization or coordination, are ignored. More appropriate strategies to capture robust evidence - i.e. structured, triangulated/verified, not anecdotal only - would allow MSPs to show their results at intermediate stages, demonstrating a link between platform activities and their ultimate impacts. Such M&E capability is generally lacking.

We define a multistakeholder platform (MSP) as an action-oriented collaboration between multiple private and public stakeholders, and possibly civil society members. MSPs seek sustainable solutions to complex and systemic challenges which no one party can achieve alone, catalysing multiple effects on a long-term or open-ended time horizon. We do not consider purely learning and knowledge networks.³

The 'Evidence for Multistakeholder Platforms'² initiative aims to address this. It is an action research programme offering initial reflections on how effectively MSPs contribute to sustainable solutions to agrifood issues, and on identifying more appropriate approaches for assessing such effectiveness.

Our aims are to:

- help platforms credibly assess their contribution, leading to their improved effectiveness;
- identify appropriate and plausible evidence and new approaches to assessing the effectiveness of MSPs;
- support decision-makers with choices on strategic support for MSPs.

Our research involves three stages:

- 1. structured scans:** mapping and categorizing of the 'universe' of multistakeholder platforms and the connections between them¹.
- 2. deep dives:** working with selected MSPs to jointly research how a platform's intentions are reflected in its activities, leading through direct and indirect outcomes to impact, in relation to a platform's theory of change.
- 3. assessment design:** facilitate exchanges between platforms and develop a generic, MSP appropriate approach to assessing effectiveness.

We focus on MSPs related to the food and agriculture sector that fit our definition. Their goals typically include structural transformations - such as changes in business climate, accepted norms for responsible investment or giving voice to unheard parties - that also support development goals, such as more jobs, better incomes, and improved food security and nutrition. Platform activities or functions (such as learning, mobilising funds, and accountability) often focus on enabling conditions that support others to undertake relevant action.

1] See Structured Scan 01 - An overview: <https://tinyurl.com/yc9rk7me>

2] The initiative is implemented by Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation, the Centre for Business and Development (Institute of Development Studies), Sustainable Food Lab, The Partnering Initiative and Ashley Insight, and is funded by the Rockefeller Foundation.

3] There is no common definition amongst platform members, stakeholders, and researchers for what a MSP is. The term is used for quite different entities. Our definition is to focus our research.

Stage 1: Structured Scans

The purpose of the structured scans is to:

- identify relevant platforms that meet our definition above;
- systematically gather core data from them;
- sketch out the underlying theories of change.

Initially 50 MSPs were identified in the food and agriculture sector, the majority of them operating in Africa or globally; 38 of the 50 proved to be workable⁴. How and on what basis we selected platforms is explained in our methodology document⁵.

The structured scans map public information about the platforms -mostly from their websites - against parameters defined in our Conceptual Framework. The framework considers the different levels of a platform's theory of change. It looks at how the vision of a platform (identified challenges and the intentions of the platform) cascades through the platform's implementation and value proposition (the arrangements and functions created within the platform itself), through to the activities and outputs of the platform and its members, through to the outcomes and the final change desired. The framework also looks at how the process is assessed and the learning from it gathered.

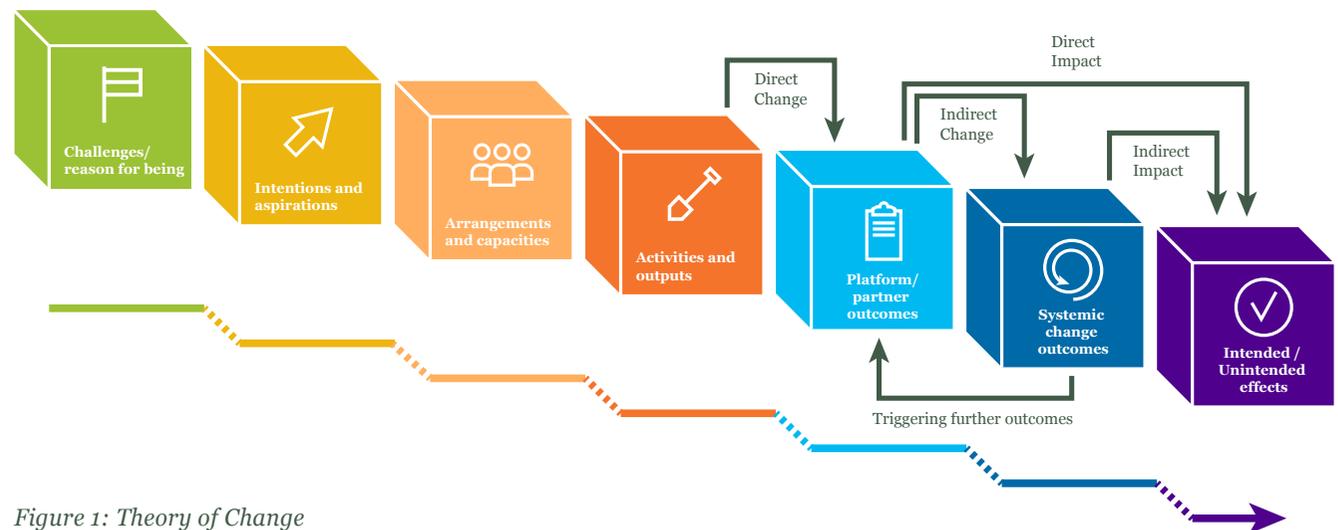
Each scan includes:

- general information
- challenges to be tackled and platform contribution
- intentions and aspirations
- arrangements and capacities
- activities and outputs
- M&E frameworks

All scans can be found at <http://msplatforms.org/platform-quickscan/>

A scan tries to capture how the platform creates impact and the aspired value for society and nature. In many cases, though, detailed information is not publicly available. Understanding the pathways of change requires direct engagement with the platforms themselves⁶.

We gathered almost all information from platforms themselves, notably through main platform websites and their downloadable documents.



⁴] 12 were removed as they were no longer active, ultimately didn't fit our definition, or there was no information available on them.

⁵] Link to methodology document: <https://tinyurl.com/ybyggnu4>

⁶] The second stage of our research is a deep-dive process, see last page

Figure 1: Theory of Change

Categorisation of MS Platforms

Most of the 38 platforms pursue similar goals using similar functions or activities. We identified six common goals, with four major functions or activities carried out by MSPs. All platforms include an element of policy advocacy as part of their overall approach.

The six major goals that platforms pursue are:

- 1. Transformation:** to 'transform' a system towards a more inclusive and sustainable one within the food and agriculture sector (agriculture, food system, health and nutrition);
- 2. Productivity:** to increase agricultural productivity in a more inclusive way; supply oriented;
- 3. Market development/farmer income:** to boost market demand and smallholder farmer incomes;
- 4. Innovation:** to introduce new, possibly disruptive elements or ideas that could contribute to system transformation;
- 5. Competitiveness:** to improve the competitiveness of a specific value chain to increase smallholder farmers' incomes;
- 6. Responsibility:** to promote changes in the behaviour or processes of the value chain actors.

The four core mechanisms or activities through which the platforms achieve these goals are:

- 1. Brokering partnerships or subsidiary platforms** (multicountry): the platform believes in catalysing change by brokering or bringing new stakeholders together in an effort to improve coordination, create synergies and pilot solutions;
- 2. Promoting investment:** the platform aims to create change by increasing investments, mostly in infrastructure or business development, creating public goods or lower risks for some commercial ventures;
- 3. Coordination** of markets, value chains, and supporting services: improved coordination between actors along the value chain;
- 4. Sharing best practices/standards:** all actors comply with a minimum set of behaviours, processes, or standards in the value chain, making it more inclusive or sustainable.

Our hypothesis is that the various platforms have different theories of change, based on the function or activity through which they seek to deliver change and the high-level goal or impact they are trying to achieve. This will affect the type of evidence they need to gather and narrative needed to demonstrate clear contribution to plausible enabling conditions.

We have identified four categories of platforms with a similar theory of change:

- 1. Transformation (regional/global):** Transformation (in agriculture, food systems, health, and nutrition) through brokering partnerships and platforms in multiple countries;
- 2. Transformation (national):** Transformation (in agriculture, food systems, health, and nutrition) through promoting investment in business and infrastructure in one country;
- 3. Productivity Focus:** Increasing agricultural productivity through coordination of markets, value chains, and supporting services;
- 4. Global Commodity Focus:** promoting sustainability and development through coordinated sector strategy and standards.

We initially used criteria identified by ENGAGE⁷, another platform-focused research programme from the Rockefeller Foundation, for a first categorization of the platforms scanned. ENGAGE criteria are: orientation, alignment, size, purpose, geography, sector, leadership, and governance. All of the platforms we mapped are action-oriented, large in size, and with the aim of achieving long-term or systemic outcomes. However, they vary in geography, sector, leadership, and governance, as described below.

⁷ <http://engage.rockefellerfoundation.org/>. ENGAGE has produced an online guide with frameworks, tools, insights, and stories to help funders explore critical questions around fostering platforms

Initial observations from Structured Scans

This section presents our initial reflections on the nature of the platforms identified and their approach to evidence and effectiveness. With all caveats about limitations in available data and thus reliability of our limitations, we share these reflections in order to contribute to ongoing discussion and analysis.

Growth of MSPs

Our scanning process suggests the rapid growth of platforms between 2005 and 2015. Although some platforms focusing on standards, such as RSPO and World Cocoa Foundation started as early as 2000, MSP development blossomed between 2005 and 2012, both in number and in type of platform (see figure 3).

Geography and focus

Half of the platforms we identified work on a global level in different countries, while one in six work in different countries from the same region. One-third of them work in one country, of which again a third works in a subregion of a country and the remaining two-thirds on the national level. There is a roughly equal split between platforms that focus on one crop, multiple crops, or do not specify a crop focus.

Arrangements

The majority of the platforms (92 percent) operate through a secretariat with a more top-down leadership structure. Typically a central decision-making body (executive committee, steering committee, etc.)⁸ sets the focus or framework that guides the participants' contributions to

the network. Many of these platforms depend on donor funding, as they do not collect any significant membership fees. However, they do draw heavily on the time and other resources of active members. These platforms have mostly been initiated by international partners, such as international donors or multinational companies, though there are efforts now to better engage national actors (companies and governments).

M&E approaches

There is no harmonisation on what constitutes systematic evidence to monitor and evaluate platform impact, and a lack of data in general around platforms effectiveness. Of those platforms that do provide information, each platform uses different indicators to measure and report on their activities, outputs, and outcomes. Some rely on secondary evidence (e.g., national statistics), which may not be sufficient for them to assess their own effectiveness.

Others are beginning to invest in more robust surveys to gather outcome data; this should lead to the greater availability of evidence, while at the same time raising issues of resources and capacity to carry these out on an ongoing basis. In both cases, the monitoring and evaluation systems measure what happens at different levels of the Theory of Change, often those closer to the impact or goal. Yet the real "story" is missing: how are the levels connected? Only few narratives describe how processes and events link, for example, activities with outcomes.

Figure 1: Geographic focus of MSPs

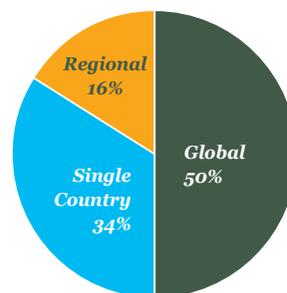


Figure 2: Crop focus of MSPs

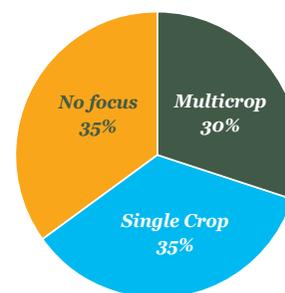


Figure 3: Number of MSPs created every year

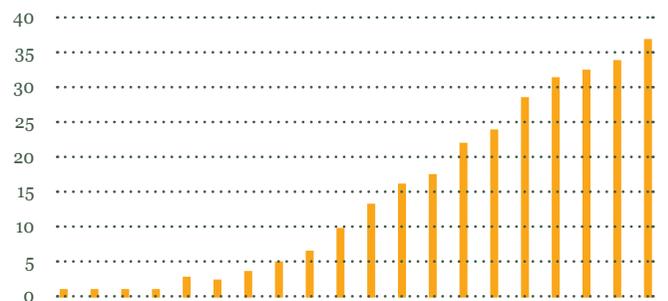
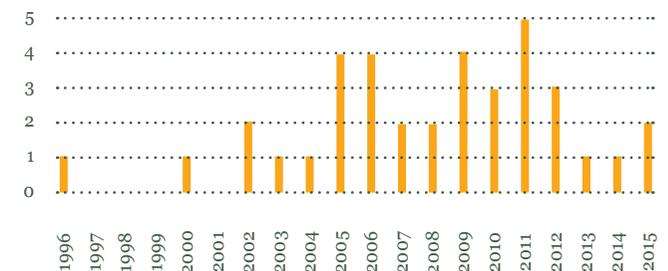


Figure 4: Evolution of MSPs creation

Source: own analysis from platforms' public information

⁸ <http://engage.rockefellerfoundation.org/what-could-a-network-help-me-achieve/what-network-design-would-be-the-most-useful/>

A network perspective on platforms

We used the structured scans for an initial exploration of connections between a large number of these platforms, specifically looking at membership and leadership. An analysis along other parameters, such as platform activities and outputs, would be useful in the future.

We identified substantial overlap in membership between platforms, with certain donors and companies being central to many of them. This includes individuals who are part of the governance of more than one platform. For example, Yara and Bayer are active private sector members in many platforms. DFID, USAID, and UN agencies are frequent core donors.

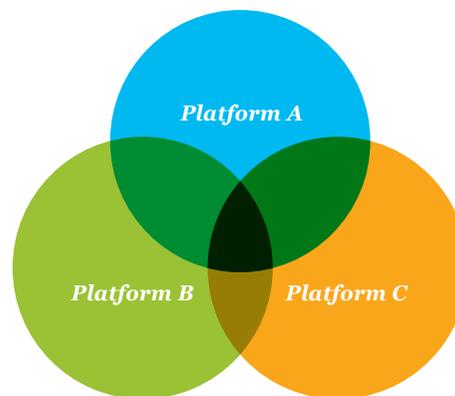
While the rapid growth in new platforms could suggest a rising global interest in this type of approach, our members' analysis shows instead that the same or similar actors are becoming involved in multiple platforms. New platforms are thus not necessarily drawing in new actors. This may be because of additional resources and leadership capacity of the lead firms and their centrality in the global food system. It can also mean there are relatively few key actors committed to a multistakeholder approach.

This has implications for understanding the effectiveness of MSPs as a way of tackling complex issues. In the end, only a few members may have influenced what many platforms do. Platforms may also be complementary, with their combined effect being bigger than the effect that each could have had independently. We therefore need to consider the effectiveness of a group of platforms, as well as individual platform performance. The same data can be relevant evidence for multiple platforms. For example, the changed policy of a particular company may be seen as evidence of effectiveness of more than one platform.

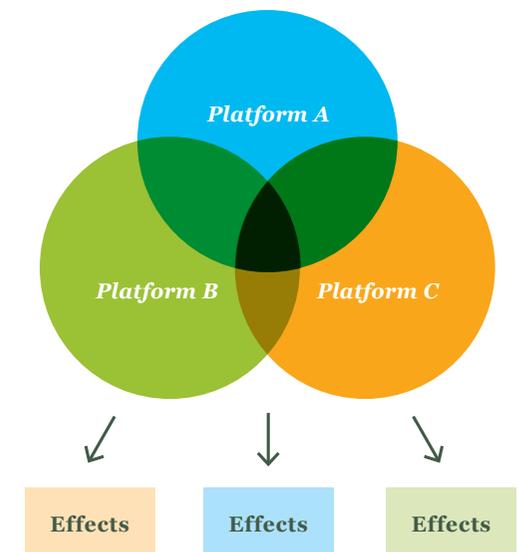
A network perspective further suggests that the four categories we identified may perform different functions in wider (system) change processes. A small and seemingly insignificant platform may turn out to be the breeding ground of innovative ideas, which, through shared membership, spread to other platforms that have more capacity for taking this to scale. Or the standard-setting of one platform may help to guide and direct efforts in another platform so that they work more towards sustainability and inclusiveness.

This is also relevant for donors who want to choose where to invest their support. A 'simple' comparing of platforms in terms of 'which ones are the most effective' may miss that they perform different and complementary roles. It may be necessary to support an 'ecosystem' of platforms, rather than only one or two.

Potentially overlapping leadership



Potentially overlapping membership



Stage 2: Deep dives

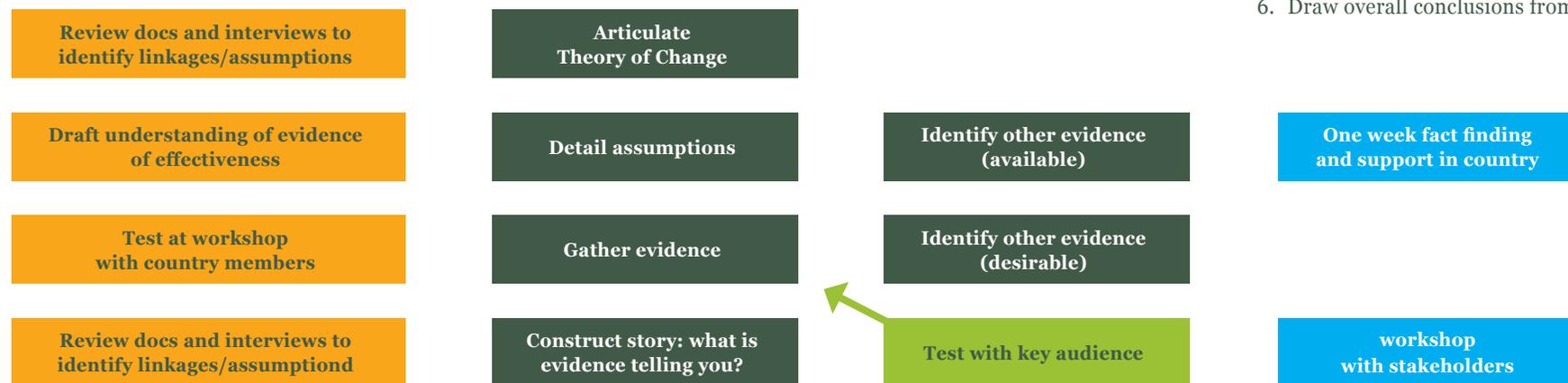
The deep dives aim to get to the heart of the most important issues for our study: **to identify and test how relevant, credible evidence, drawn from existing information and (potentially) new approaches to filling gaps, can be used to understand platform effectiveness against the theory of change.** They do not primarily gather data or measure impact.

They follow an action research logic, involving systematic enquiry and strategic engagement with platforms. **The aim is to explore assumptions, identify meaningful evidence and to use this evidence to support learning (what’s working and what not), improve effectiveness, as well as to tell a ‘plausible story’⁹ to stakeholders about the platform’s contribution.**

A joint process will work to:

1. Articulate the theory of change of how the platform intentions cascade through implementation and outcomes, along with underlying assumptions about linkages between each step.
2. Create clarity about what evidence is needed for which audiences.
3. Assemble what evidence is already available/accessible
4. Assess the credibility of the package of evidence; and identify where there are gaps where more evidence is needed.
5. Describe how an appropriate evidence base would inform management decision making and relevant stakeholders.
6. Draw overall conclusions from addressing the above

Figure: Overview deep-dive process



⁹A plausible story means credible evidence that demonstrates the likelihood of (rather than proves) a relationship between interventions and observed changes. Credible evidence does not imply quantitative impact data or large-scale surveys. However, it requires reviewing available evidence to understand probable connections, and the appropriate depth of evidence to make a credible case for connections at different steps in the chain.

Stage 3: Assessment design

The overall methodology developed, with the experience and information gathered during the deep dives, will lead to a general approach to assessing the effectiveness of MS Platforms. This will probably include the following:

- Generic Theory of Change for MS Platforms
- Categorisation of MSPs, and significant differences in their theories of change
- Criteria for identifying appropriate evidence for different audiences
- Overview of specific evidence sources that might be appropriate for a specific MSP
- General comments on the effectiveness of MSPs, based on deep dive assessments
- Revised narratives of several MSPs on effectiveness (this will depend on the public or internal nature of these revisions)

The generic assessment process will be discussed with key donors and funding members of MSPs. As it is 'she who pays the piper who calls the tune', donors and funders have a very strong influence on how platforms currently report on what they are achieving. Donors and funders often require highly detailed, household level impact data, which might not be appropriate or reliable. In doing so, they inadvertently make it much harder for platforms to do demonstrate what they are achieving at the level of system change and influencing behaviour. If the discussion around the effectiveness and appropriateness of MSPs is to become more strategic, donors and funders must be willing to consider new ways of assessing platforms. Equally, the reporting needs of these key financiers must be fed by any new approach to assessing the effectiveness of multistakeholder platforms.