



DEFINING IMPACT

Impact Paper Series
Episode 1, 1st Edition
2024

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

Purpose: Why the Impact Paper Series?

Welthungerhilfe is committed to a world in which all people can exercise their right to lead a self-determined life in dignity and justice, free of hunger and poverty. Transforming food and interrelated systems is at the heart of our strategy. As such, our understanding, measurement, and management of impact needs to reflect our commitment to system transformation. This document is part of Welthungerhilfe's "Impact Paper Series", a collection of white papers that analyze impact-related concepts and propose solutions (i.e. definitions, methods, approaches, tools) to better understand, measure, scale and communicate our impact.

Episode 1, "Defining Impact", maps out the sector-wide understanding of impact and formulates recommendations for Welthungerhilfe to adopt a coherent and well-explained definition of impact. This work responds to the evolving global discourse around impact. Impact is increasingly understood as a causal effect (p.10,14-19). Furthermore, the shift of international cooperation and humanitarian action toward systemic thinking and practice requires a corresponding systemic interpretation of impact (p.9-11,19).

Content and structure: What does this document entail?

This document encompasses Welthungerhilfe's investigation into the interpretation of impact. Key highlights are provided on p.1-2, followed by an executive summary on p.3-7. The document explains the case for a new impact definition (p.9-12) and benchmarks definitions of different actors (p.14-19). Drawing on an analysis of Welthungerhilfe's past terminology (Annex 4) and an extensive consultation process (Annex 5), it then proposes new outcome and impact definitions (p.21-26). This paper is conceptualized as a living document, reflecting Welthungerhilfe's commitment to being a learning organization. The current document is built on a comprehensive analysis and reflects the current discourse and practice but needs to be updated as these evolve.

Audience: Who should read this document?

This document is primarily aimed at readers interested in the logic behind Welthungerhilfe's current impact definition, such as donors, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, academics, policy makers, and technical experts. For practitioners, relevant key findings and implications have been summarized in a short publication "*Defining Impact: Practitioner's Brief*".

Implications: Why is this document important?

The new impact definition is expected to serve as a foundation for guidance on measuring and scaling impact - topics that will unfold in future episodes of this paper series. "Episode 2 – Measuring Impact" will explore the intricacies of impact measurement, equip practitioners with guidance on method selection, and furnish a practical toolbox to facilitate the implementation of these methods. "Episode 3 – Scaling Impact" will describe how impact can be taken to scale.

Authors: Who wrote this document?

Tereza Kaplan, Impact & System Evaluation Advisor,
tereza.kaplan@welthungerhilfe.de

Marta Siebel, Evaluation Intern

Sebastian Schuster, MEAL Team Lead,
sebastian.schuster@welthungerhilfe.de

Arno Bratz, Head of Sector Strategy,
Knowledge and Learning,
arno.bratz@welthungerhilfe.de

How to cite this document:

Deutsche Welthungerhilfe e. V. "Defining Impact." *Welthungerhilfe's Impact Paper Series: Episode 1*, 1st edition. Bonn, 2024. <https://www.welthungerhilfe.org/defining-impact-paper>

Title-Photo: Brazier/Welthungerhilfe

Shallom Mtakiwa from Gokwe district, Zimbabwe, attended Micro Entrepreneurship Training by the Agricultural Business Center (ABC). After the training, she initiated various income-generating activities, such as poultry and farming. The ABC, established by Welthungerhilfe, assists farmers in accessing agricultural inputs, acquiring the necessary crop-growing skills, and selling their produce at fair market prices.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all colleagues from Welthungerhilfe, our partner organizations and external experts who shared their expertise during the development of this white paper. First and foremost, we wish to express our deep appreciation to the members of the *Impact Reference Group* who have accompanied the process of drafting this paper by bringing technical and on-the-ground experience to strengthen the paper's relevance and practicality. Specifically, we would like to acknowledge the contributions of

Amadou Abdoulaye Alio	Welthungerhilfe Country Office Mali
Asia Aman	Welthungerhilfe Country Office Pakistan
Berns Komba Lebbie	Land for Life, Sierra Leone
Carolin Averbeck	Welthungerhilfe Technical Team, Germany
Christopher Wynn Mitscherlich	Welthungerhilfe Humanitarian Directorate, Germany
Cristina Andrei	Welthungerhilfe Regional Directorate, Germany
Dennis Ocoka	Welthungerhilfe Country Office South Sudan
George Kaluba	Welthungerhilfe Country Office Malawi
Gospell Matondi	Welthungerhilfe Country Office Sierra Leone
Jameson Gadzirai	Welthungerhilfe Country Office Niger
Jasmin Kootummel	Welthungerhilfe Technical Team, Germany
Keshab Joshi	Center for Environmental and Agricultural Policy Research, Extension and Development, Nepal
Maheshwor Rijal	Welthungerhilfe Country Office Nepal
Maziko Nkhulembe	CISANET, Malawi
Nathalie Demel	Welthungerhilfe Policy & External Relations, Germany
Rahul Jain	Welthungerhilfe Country Office India
Regina Feindt	Welthungerhilfe Country Office Zimbabwe
Shahid Ali	Fast Rural Development Program, Pakistan
Sheila Lyona	The Institute of Social Accountability, Kenya
Timo Christians	Welthungerhilfe Institutional Donor Unit, Germany

We are also thankful to other colleagues in various units and teams across Welthungerhilfe for their collaborative spirit, stimulating discussions and constructive feedback. We extend our deep appreciation for the insights of external experts who provided their inputs:

Prof. Dr. Christoph Kohlmeyer	previously TU-Dortmund, BMZ, African Development Bank, Germany
Prof. Dr. Conrad Schetter	Director, Bonn International Center for Conflict Studies (BICC), Germany
Dena Lomofsky	Southern Hemisphere, Cape Town University, South Africa
Eddah Kanini	Independent consultant, Jomo Kenyatta University African Evaluation Association, Kenya
Prof. Dr. Joachim von Braun	Distinguished Professor for Economic and Technical Change, Center for Development Research (ZEF), University of Bonn, Germany
Julius Nyangaga	Right Track Africa, Kenya
Dr. Manfred Denich	Bonn University, Germany
Michael Oyinlola	Navanti Group, Nigeria
Wendy Wilfred	Global Youth Impact Mission, Uganda

We are also grateful for the continuous support, guidance, and resources provided by our organization's leadership and advisory committees. This collaborative effort reflects the dedication and commitment of a diverse and global community that shares a common vision for positive change in international cooperation and humanitarian action. Thank you all for your invaluable contributions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

KEY HIGHLIGHTS	1
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
1. THE CASE FOR (RE-)DEFINING IMPACT	9
The evolution of international cooperation and humanitarian action signals a shift toward a more systemic thinking and practice	9
Agencies emphasize impact and causal relationships as justification pressure rises	10
A non-systemic understanding of impact is not appropriate	10
Tracing the understanding of impact within Welthungerhilfe	11
2. BENCHMARKING	14
Six attributes of impact	14
Causality is the core attribute of impact	14
Emphasizing causality for a clear and practical distinction between impact and outcome	15
Theory guides the investigation into causality	17
Different views on causality: attribution vs contribution	17
Actors are split between attribution and contribution thinking	18
Contribution-minded actors embrace a more systemic outlook on impact	19
3. WELTHUNGERHILFE'S NEW IMPACT AND OUTCOME TERMINOLOGY	21
Definitions of Outcomes and Impact	21
Impact and Outcome Classification Scheme	22
4. OUTLOOK: IMPACT AS A FOUNDATION FOR SYSTEM-BASED PROGRAMMING	27
GLOSSARY	28
ANNEXES	30
Annex 1: Complete impact definitions and sources	30
Annex 2: Categorization of views on causality	30
Annex 3: Coverage of attributes by organization	30
Annex 4: Gap analysis	30
Annex 5: Consultation process and results	30
BIBLIOGRAPHY	31

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

WHY IS WELTHUNGERHILFE RE-DEFINING IMPACT NOW? ?

Organizations in international cooperation and humanitarian action face mounting pressure from donors and the general public to prove their impact and justify their funding. As a result, organizations are rushing to provide evidence of “causal effects”, or evidence that shows that their interventions lead to positive changes. At the same time, as organizations address increasingly complex challenges in the midst of the ongoing global poly and perma-crises, many are adopting system strengthening and transformation approaches. Such approaches are themselves

more complex and require a systemic interpretation of impact: one that acknowledges that organizations interact with a system, and that their work affects not just the people in the system but also the system as a whole. However, most impact definitions that are currently employed in the sector neither recognize impact clearly as a “causal effect”, nor do they include a systemic interpretation of impact. Thus, Welthungerhilfe has developed a new and unique definition that satisfies both of these conditions.

HOW HAS WELTHUNGERHILFE RE-DEFINED IMPACT?

With this document, Welthungerhilfe updates its impact and outcome definitions based on a comprehensive analysis of existing outcome and impact definitions of 41 organizations in international cooperation and humanitarian action, including development

cooperation agencies, international institutions, NGOs and think tanks. The findings of the analysis served as a basis for Welthungerhilfe’s new terminology, formulated collectively by a reference group consisting of its staff and partner organizations from 11 countries.

WHAT ARE WELTHUNGERHILFE’S UPDATED IMPACT AND OUTCOME DEFINITIONS?

Welthungerhilfe’s updated definition describes outcomes as changes that are plausibly caused by the intervention but lack proof of causation.

outcome was caused by the intervention. This requires examining the concrete role that an intervention, as well as other factors, have in leading to an outcome using right-fit methods. In addition, Welthungerhilfe’s new definition emphasizes that an outcome can only be labeled as impact if it is relevant for people affected by hunger and poverty.

Observing a desired change in the presence of the intervention does not mean that it was caused by the intervention and is not sufficient to prove* a causal effect. Only if the causal effect between the change and the intervention is proven, an outcome can be labeled as impact. Therefore, Welthungerhilfe speaks of impact when it has strong evidence that the

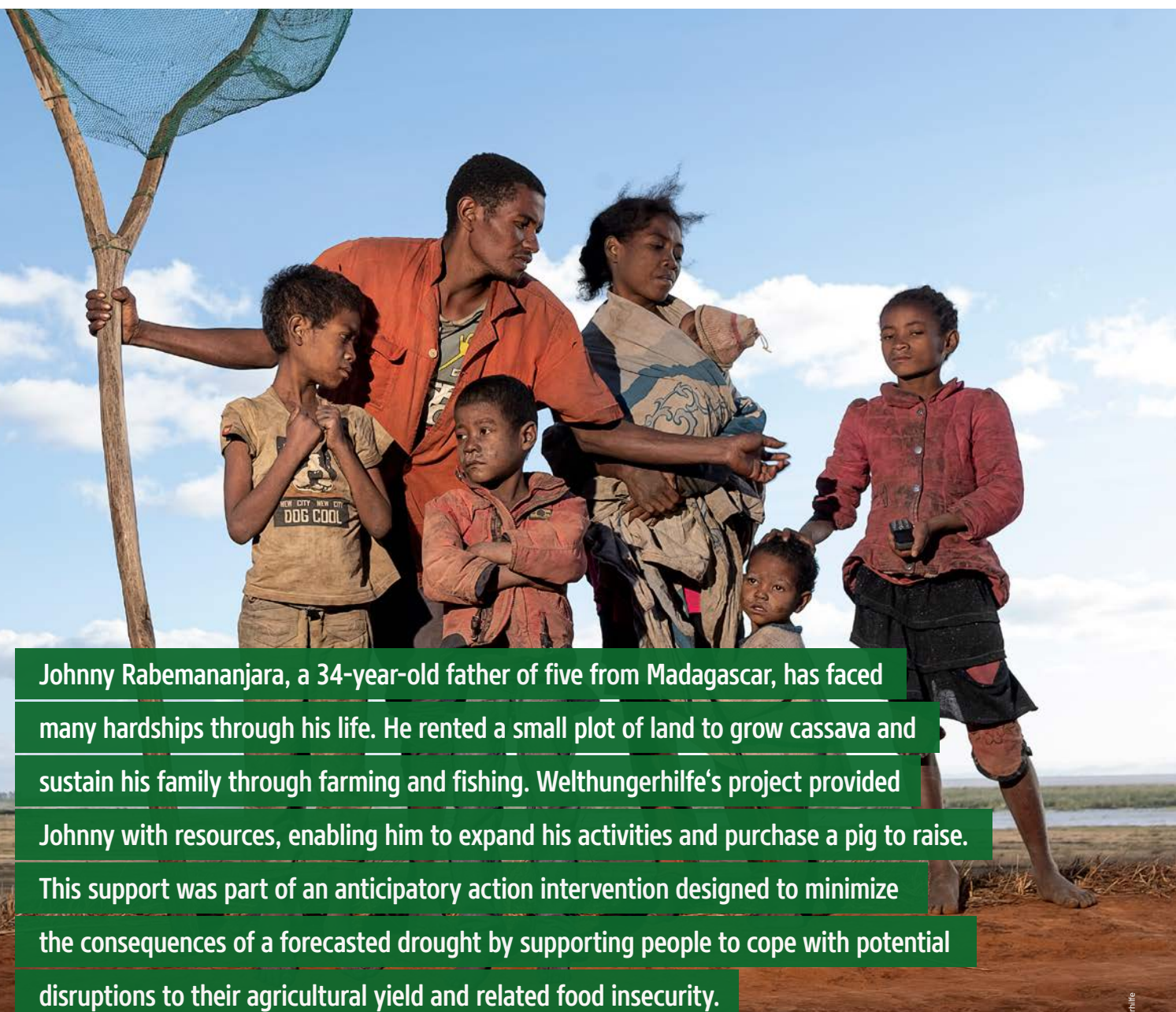
A complete wording and explanation of the definitions is available on pages 6-7 and 21-26.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF WELTHUNGERHILFE’S IMPACT AND OUTCOME DEFINITIONS?

1. The definition directly **addresses the need to justify our work** and provides evidence of impact by stressing that impact is about showing whether, to what extent, and how **the intervention caused the change**.
2. The definition **protects our credibility** by being careful to only use the label “impact” when we have evidence that the intervention caused the change partially or fully. In doing so, we commit to the most recent methodological standards within the evaluation field for establishing causality.
3. The definition promotes **smart investment into evaluation**. We recognize that impact measurement is costly, and hence, we evaluate scalable approaches rather than individual projects and programs. When it does not make sense to measure impact, the definition allows us to establish plausibility and label changes as outcomes, which can be cheaper.

* The word “prove” is used for readability and conciseness. From a scientific standpoint, a causal effect cannot be proved, but is instead established with evidence.

4. The definition is **open to different impact evaluation methods** because it emphasizes that evidence of impact has to be established through right-fit methods. This way, we combine a high methodological standard with openness to different types of impact measurement methods that establish causal links between interventions and outcomes, such as experimental, quasi-experimental, theory-based, case-based and participatory methods. The specific impact measurement methods will be detailed in the second episode of this paper series, “Measuring Impact”.
5. The definition acknowledges our **impact both on people’s wellbeing and on systems as such**. In doing so, the definition moves away from our previous understanding of impact that limited our investigation of impact to people’s well-being, and opens us up to investigating impact areas such as governance, markets and planetary wellbeing that are crucial to ensure that improvements in people’s wellbeing are sustainable. The definition thus follows the paradigm of organizations such as USAID, 3ie, World Bank and WFP that holds that outcomes at any level can be labeled as impact if a causal link with the intervention is established.
6. The definition stresses that **impact must be relevant** for people affected by hunger and poverty. It thus roots impact in the reality of people.
7. By outlining specific **dimensions of outcomes and impact** (reach, size, duration and equity), the new definition provides a foundation for how to scale impact. Strategies for scaling will be outlined in the third episode of this paper series, “Scaling Impact”.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHY IMPACT?

Welthungerhilfe aims to contribute to our vision of a world in which all people can exercise their right to lead a self-determined life in dignity and justice, free of hunger and poverty. We recognize that our world is facing interconnected challenges such as conflict, the climate crisis, environmental degradation, social injustice, and economic instability. **Against this backdrop, we can only realize our vision by thinking and acting collectively, and by focusing our work on key areas that lead to the most impactful improvements.** This is why our strategy highlights our commitment to sustainable and resilient food systems and interrelated systems.

Achieving impact at scale and in a sustainable manner demands that we understand, measure, design for and scale impact in a way that considers the systems in which the interventions we evaluate are implemented. Our understanding of impact can encourage us to consider how we collaborate with system actors, how we can disrupt vicious cycles of reinforcing negative change, and how we can sustain and scale positive change. **Impact guides our efforts toward a more sustainable and positively evolving world in which everyone can lead a self-determined life in dignity and justice, free from hunger and poverty.**

WHY (RE-)DEFINING IMPACT?

Welthungerhilfe acknowledges that system strengthening and transforming can address the interconnected environmental, social, political, and economic factors that influence sustainable improvements in the lives and wellbeing of people and the planet. Concurrently, we embrace the imperative to reflect on theory and concepts, in order to update our definition of impact and align it with our vision of deep, lasting changes within systems. **While the need for system transformation is increasingly recognized, a systemic understanding of impact is not universally shared among key stakeholders.** This misalignment prompts the need for a re-evaluation of our definitions to ensure they accurately reflect our aspirations for fundamental system-transformative changes. **Furthermore, a re-evaluation will help comply with the increasing demand for justifications in the current environment of international cooperation and humanitarian action, where the understanding of impact as a “causal effect” (between the intervention and the change) is increasingly emphasized.**

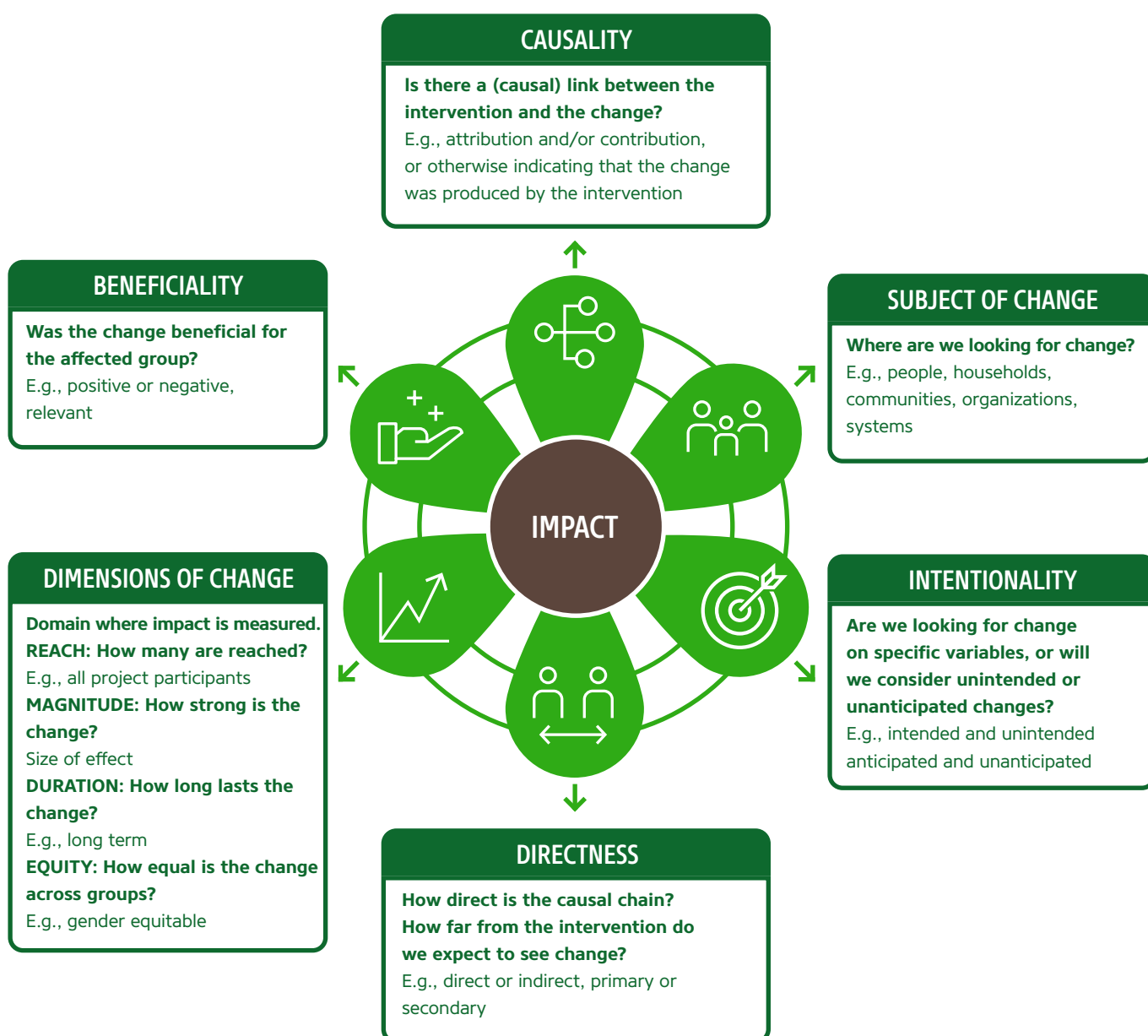
The comprehension of impact should also reflect perspectives on recent discourses within international cooperation and humanitarian action. The transformation imperative necessitates that the definition of impact is open to encompass the potential of systems to embark on a shifted trajectory in reinforcing and sustaining improvements. The call for localization and local ownership demands that local actors take ownership of impact as well as its definition and assessment. Participation emphasizes the need to define and measure progress that is meaningful and relevant to the people involved in, and affected by, international cooperation and humanitarian assistance. Changes addressing norms and mindsets, including gender norms and human rights, may take decades to materialize and often span beyond the duration of the intervention. Welthungerhilfe is committed to actualizing these discourses in our approaches and actions. Aligning our understanding of impact with the overarching vision and core values to drive meaningful global change represents a pivotal step in this endeavor.

BENCHMARKING STUDY

As a foundation for the refinement of our impact definition, we performed a benchmarking study analyzing impact definitions of 41 actors working within international cooperation and humanitarian action, including international institutions, national development cooperation agencies, non-governmental

organizations and think tanks. We drew six key attributes that characterize impact from academic literature to guide the analysis of the actors' impact definitions. The six attributes of impact are presented in ES-Figure 1 below.

ES-Figure 1: Six attributes that characterize impact



The study analyzing the actors' impact definitions using the six impact attributes yielded the following key findings:

Causality is the core attribute of impact

Causality is the most widely used attribute of impact with consistent reference across all reviewed definitions, while the application of the other five impact attributes exhibits great variability. Causality seeks to connect and determine **whether, to what extent and how an intervention played a role in bringing about a change**. Observing a desired change in the presence of the intervention doesn't inherently imply causality; instead, causality requires establishing through evidence that the intervention played a role in bringing about the change.

Emphasizing causality for a clear and practical distinction between impact and outcomes

Causality is used by several actors to distinguish between impact and outcomes, while others distinguish between the two concepts by emphasizing the level at which the change takes place, as illustrated in ES-Figure 2.

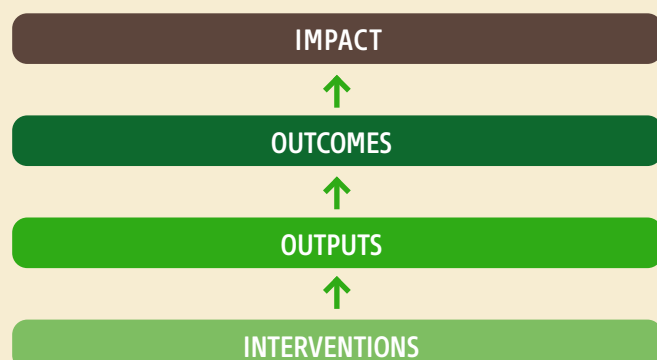
Emphasis on the level of change (ES-Figure 2a) implies that impact follows outcomes, whereby impact is reached when a “higher-level” or “long-term” change has occurred. This approach may be critiqued for two reasons: firstly, it is ambiguous and largely subjective when a “higher-level” or “long-term” change has occurred, making outcomes and impact hardly distinguishable in practice. Secondly, it views outcomes as effects of outputs, and impact as an effect of outcomes, which implies a requirement to establish causality through evidence at every level of the chain – a condition difficult to satisfy in practice.

Emphasis on causality (ES-Figure 2b) as a distinguishing element between impact and outcomes means that a reference to causal effect is **only included in the impact definition**, and not in the outcome definition. This approach views outcomes as observable changes in variables of interest that only qualify as impact when causality is established through evidence. In this sense, outcomes demand measurement of variables of interest that are **plausibly** linked to interventions. Measurement of impact involves establishing that a causal link is **probable** using right-fit evidence to minimize the uncertainty about the intervention’s contribution to the change.

ES - Figure 2: Two possible approaches for distinguishing impact and outcomes

Fig 2a.

Differentiation between outcomes and impact, **emphasis on the level of change**



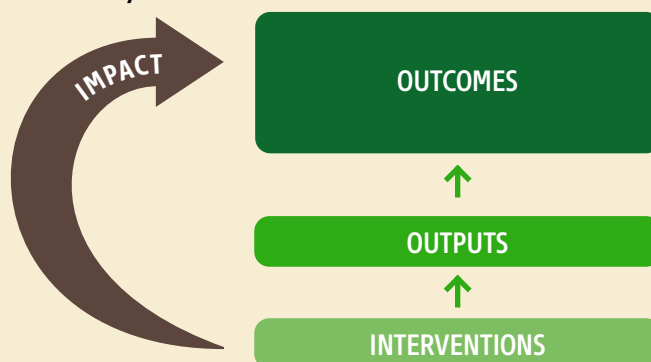
Inclusion criteria: (1) Definition of outcomes sets a condition of causality, and
(2) Definition of impact emphasizes level of change

Anchor examples: “high-level effects“,
“ultimate effects“,
“long-term effects“

Adopted by: ICRC, OECD, Action Against Hunger, Brot für die Welt, Agiamondo, Kindernothilfe ...

Fig 2b.

Differentiation between outcomes and impact, **emphasis on causality**



Inclusion criteria: (1) Definition of outcomes does not set a condition of causality, and
(2) Definition of impact includes a causal link between the intervention and the outcome

Anchor examples: “effects of the intervention on outcomes“
“changes in outcomes that can be attributed“

Adopted by: USAID, WFP, World Bank, 3ie ...

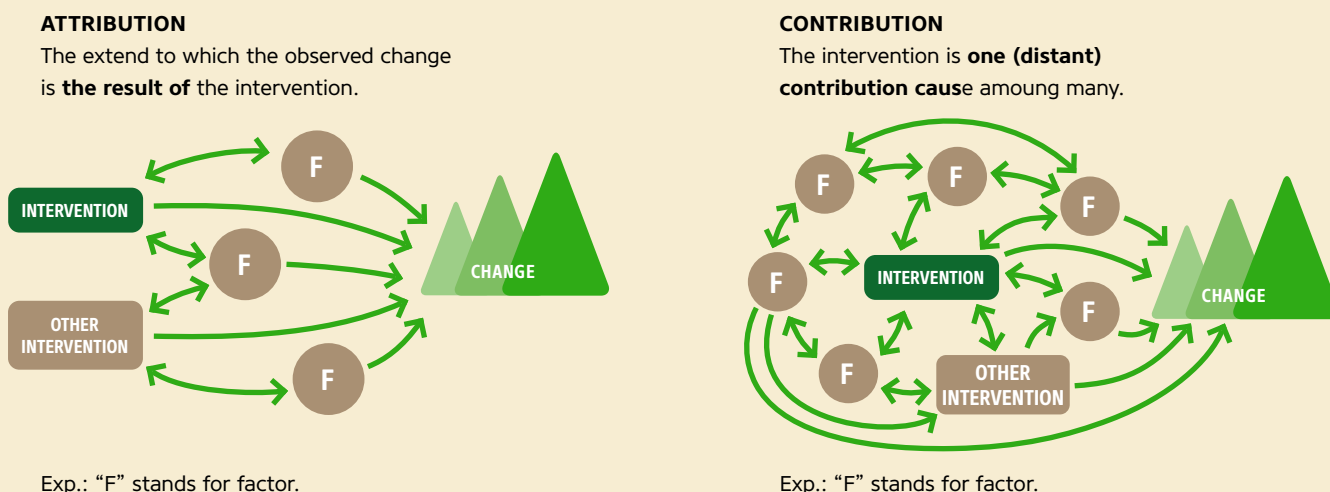
Theory guides the investigation into causality

A theory that guides the investigation into causality is a common feature of both approaches that differentiate impact from outcomes. Such theory often presents itself in the form of causal chains or Theory of Change models, outlining the sequence from the initial causes to final changes. However, verifying the occurrence of the changes outlined in the theories isn’t adequate for establishing causality. Instead, the underlying theory explains how changes materialize and lays a basis for exploring causal relationships.

Different views on causality: attribution vs contribution

Actors interpret causality through two main perspectives: attribution and contribution (ES-Figure 3). Attribution estimates the extent to which the observed change is the result of the intervention. Contribution examines the intervention's role among numerous causes in a complex system, validating causal theories and scrutinizing various factors to reduce uncertainty about the intervention's contribution.

ES - Figure 3: Attribution and contribution as the two main perspectives on causality



Actors are split in their interpretation of causality as attribution or contribution

International institutions tend to interpret causality as both attribution and contribution. Development cooperation agencies view it as attribution or a combination of both, while NGOs prefer contribution or lack a clear stance. Overall, the interpretation as both prevails, adopted by 15 of the 41 organizations, including the OECD/DAC, influencing many others.

Contribution-minded actors embrace a more systemic outlook on impact

Contribution-minded actors adopt a more systemic outlook on impact, extending the scope beyond individuals and covering dimensions like duration, magnitude, and equity. In contrast, those focused on attribution often cover only duration.

WELTHUNGERHILFE'S NEW IMPACT AND OUTCOME TERMINOLOGY AND CLASSIFICATION

Based on the results of the benchmarking study, a gap analysis of Welthungerhilfe's previous definitions, and consultations with staff and partner organizations,

Welthungerhilfe adopts new impact and outcome terminology and classification.

OUTCOMES

are changes in the behavior of people, the wellbeing of people and the planet, and in the behavior, structures and paradigms of the systems that they are part of, that are assumed to be causally linked to the intervention. Outcomes may be intended or unintended, positive or negative, and can be assessed along the dimensions of reach, size, duration and equity.

IMPACT

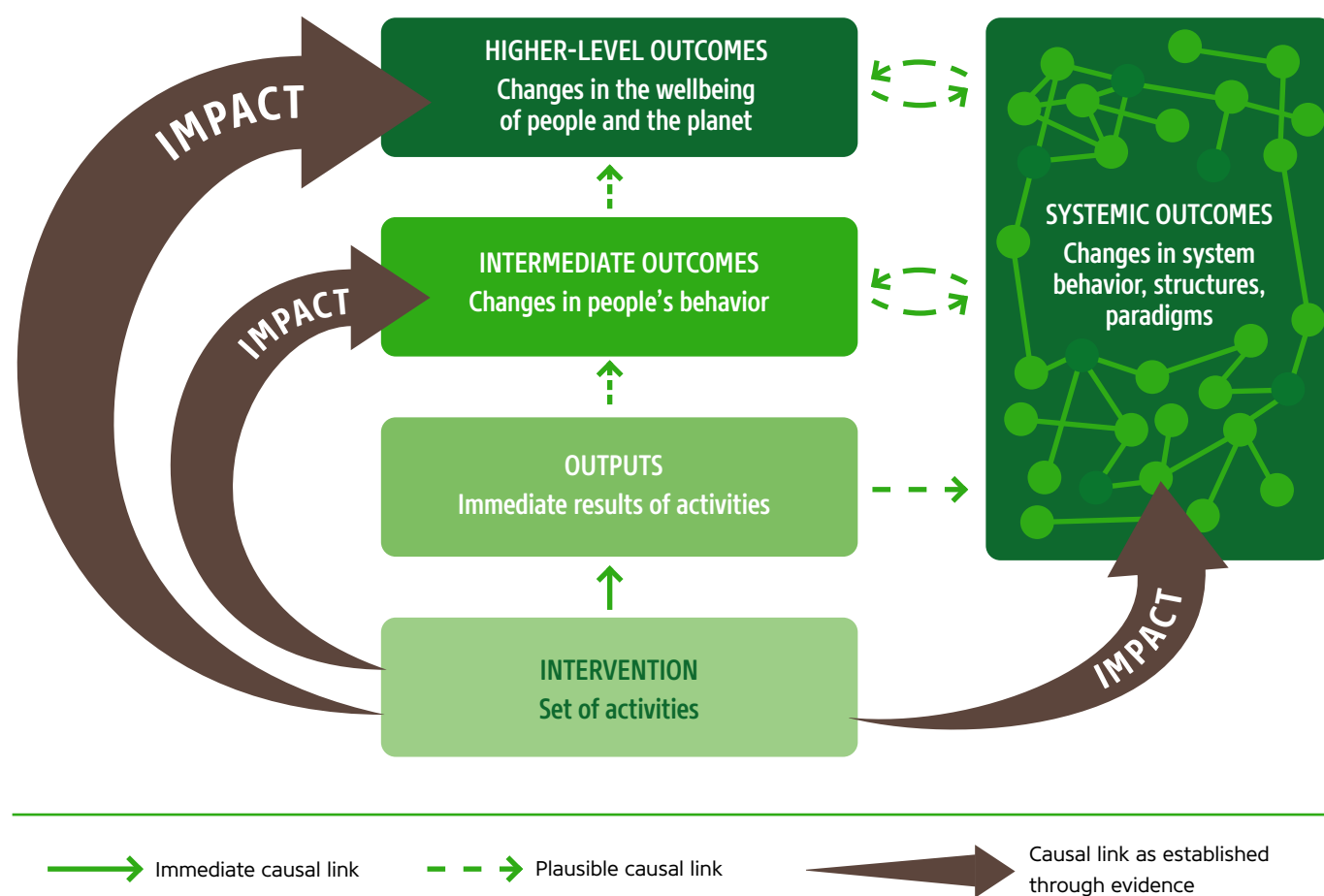
refers to outcomes that are contributed by or attributed to interventions, and that are relevant for people affected by hunger and poverty.

Outcomes are assumed to be linked to an intervention when the causal link is **plausible based on priorly existing evidence, knowledge, or theoretical deduction**. By contrast, the definition of impact requires that **evidence of a causal link is established between outcomes and interventions using attribution or contribution methods**. Outcomes and impact may **occur in people, the planet, and systems**. They may be intended or unintended, positive or negative. **They are assessed along multiple dimensions** (reach, magnitude, duration, equity). Additionally, the impact

definition includes a relevance criterion, meaning impact assessment must solicit people's perspectives on the relevance of outcomes when investigating impact.

Welthungerhilfe's Impact and Outcome Classification Scheme in ES-Figure 4 is based on a theory of change logic. It aims to establish outcome levels that are complementary, that align with our interventions and that reflect the settings in which our interventions often operate.

ES - Figure 4: Welthungerhilfe's Impact and Outcome Classification Scheme



Three levels of outcomes distinguish between intermediate outcomes representing people's behavior change, higher-level outcomes reflecting changes in wellbeing of people and the planet, and systemic outcomes consisting of changes in system behavior, structures, and paradigms. As such, the scheme **stresses the importance of impact on systems as such**. It recognizes that an **intervention can have multiple impacts**. Impact requires

that **causality** (between the intervention and an outcome) is established **by using right-fit evidence that minimizes uncertainty about the intervention's contribution**. By contrast, **outcomes require the measurement of change in variables of interest** but do not require new evidence of a causal link to the intervention so long as the link is plausible based on previous evidence, knowledge, or theoretical deduction.

OUTLOOK: IMPACT AS A FOUNDATION FOR SYSTEM-BASED PROGRAMMING

The new Welthungerhilfe terminology defines impact as a causal effect between an intervention and an outcome, while outcomes are changes that are only assumed to be caused by the intervention. The terminology recognizes the systemic interpretation of both outcomes and impact. Implications for practitioners are outlined

in the *"Defining Impact: Practitioner's Brief."* The new definitions will guide selections of evaluation methods and scaling strategies laid out in future episodes of this Impact Paper Series, thus supporting advancements to our vision of a world free from hunger and poverty.



Women from municipalities and villages in Liberia receive training on equality issues to enhance their judicial and social knowledge. As members of the Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA), they pay membership fees that grant them access to loans for investments in seeds and other necessities. The interest from these loans funds an emergency reserve, empowering the women both economically and socially, and improving their livelihoods.

1. THE CASE FOR (RE-)DEFINING IMPACT

Welthungerhilfe has a vision of “a world in which everyone has the chance and the right to lead a self-determined life in dignity and justice, free from hunger and poverty”¹. Achieving zero hunger for all at all times cannot be achieved without systemic transformation, which promotes sustainable and resilient food and WASH² systems that “ensure access to healthy diets for all people and at the same time minimize the negative effects on the environment”³. To achieve this, we delve into understanding and measuring the impact of our actions in order to scale positive impact in a sustainable manner. We ask ourselves: How do we navigate beyond anticipated outcomes? How do

we ensure sustained positive change? How do we disrupt vicious cycles that reinforce negative change, while cultivating virtuous cycles of positive change? Impact guides our efforts towards a more sustainable and positively evolving world in which everyone can lead a self-determined life in dignity and justice, free from hunger and poverty. The definition of “impact” should, therefore, enable us to reflect, understand and enhance our role and contribution toward our vision for systemic, equitable and transformative change that “improves the prospects of present and future generations, in a healthy environment and a fair society”⁴.

THE EVOLUTION OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND HUMANITARIAN ACTION SIGNALS A SHIFT TOWARD A MORE SYSTEMIC THINKING AND PRACTICE

Over the past decades, the objectives of international cooperation and humanitarian action have evolved in response to changing global priorities, emerging global challenges, and a deeper understanding of real-world complexities. The focus has expanded from mere economic growth and poverty reduction to recognizing the multidimensional nature of international cooperation. Thus, the historic perception that international development cooperation was the sole or primary driver of development outcomes has been challenged and overridden since the mid-1990s. Aid was recognized to interplay with other factors, such as world trade, governments’ own resources, and the political economy⁵. Global interconnectedness surged at the turn of the millennium, challenging the understanding of development as a process confined to the Global South⁶. Simultaneously, fragile contexts, volatile political systems and humanitarian emergencies have increased in frequency. In parallel, humanitarian action has progressively incorporated, wherever possible, a longer-term focus on fostering resilience and equitable future prospects in its preparedness and early action, as well as emergency response and recovery. International cooperation and humanitarian action have embraced a systemic perspective, which involves understanding and leveraging various

driving and hampering factors, as well as key actors and stakeholders - from local to global spheres - with which interventions interact and aim to influence, to achieve deep, sustainable, positive changes.

In 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) underscored the importance of systemic thinking by integrating sustainability as a central theme and emphasizing the interconnected nature of environmental, social, and economic aspects of international cooperation. Inequality and social inclusion, gender equality and women’s empowerment, environmental sustainability, as well as global partnerships (cooperation across countries, as well as across actors within countries) have been highlighted as key areas to promote a more integrated and transformative agenda toward sustainable development. Yet, since 2020, a series of concurrent crises have undermined international cooperation, threatened sustainable development outcomes, and exposed vulnerability in global systems. Among these were the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the ever-shorter time span left to address the climate crisis, rising extremism and deepening divisions, and increasing geopolitical rivalry⁷.

1 Deutsche Welthungerhilfe e. V., “One Planet Zero Hunger. Strategy 2021-2024” (Bonn, 2021), <https://www.welthungerhilfe.org/news/publications/detail/welthungerhilfe-strategy-2021-2024/>.

2 Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

3 Deutsche Welthungerhilfe e. V., “One Planet Zero Hunger. Strategy 2021-2024”.

4 Ibid.

5 E. Stern et al., “Broadening the Range of Designs and Methods for Impact Evaluations.,” *DFID Working Paper 38*, 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/research-for-development-outputs/dfid-working-paper-38-broadening-the-range-of-designs-and-methods-for-impact-evaluations#citation>.

6 Rory Horner, “Towards a New Paradigm of Global Development? Beyond the Limits of International Development,” *Progress in Human Geography* 44, no. 3 (June 19, 2020): 415–36, doi:10.1177/0309132519836158.

7 OECD, “Development Co-Operation Report 2023: Debating the Aid System” (Paris, 2023), doi:10.1787/f6edc3c2-en.

AGENCIES EMPHASIZE IMPACT AND CAUSAL RELATIONSHIPS AS JUSTIFICATION PRESSURE RISES

While the international cooperation system has been subject to continuous evaluation and reassessment across the years, the recent concurrent crises have placed an unprecedented strain on maximizing value from available resources⁸. Crises are affecting official international cooperation budgets, rendering them more volatile, strained, and detrimental to investments in long-term initiatives⁹. Although questioning and reflecting on the capabilities, effectiveness and impact of international cooperation and humanitarian action are longstanding (e.g., Rome 2003, Paris 2005, Accra 2008 and Busan 2011), a new sense of

urgency has arisen “to do [international] cooperation better”¹⁰. Donor agencies increasingly demand “[gathering] the data and evidence, to hold each other to account and strive to improve both the quality and quantity of [international] cooperation”¹¹ and humanitarian action. Given the growing need for justifications, actors have been refining their outcome and impact terminology to secure credible backing for their actions that comply with demands for cause-and-effect links, while reflecting practical efforts and avoiding unrealistic expectations.¹²

A NON-SYSTEMIC UNDERSTANDING OF IMPACT IS NOT APPROPRIATE

The evolving nature of international cooperation and humanitarian action has implications for the understanding of impact in this field. The following modalities and discourses challenge the established definitions of impact as well as impact evaluation practices.

System transformation¹³: How do we know if we contribute to making systems work for all at all times?

The ongoing poly- and permacrises have exposed that food systems and interrelated systems, which contribute to zero hunger, are largely unsustainable and fragile. In light of this, and combined with a widening gap between available funds and global needs, donors and implementers are increasingly focused on transforming systems to absorb shocks, adapt to changing circumstances, and sustain positive changes¹⁴. In this context, the definition of impact should be open to encompass the potential of systems to embark on a shifted trajectory in reinforcing and sustaining improvements.

Complexity: How can our definition of, and work on, impact consider other actors and factors that influence zero hunger?

As our comprehension of international cooperation and humanitarian action has evolved, interventions have become increasingly more complex, and their impact increasingly more difficult to measure.¹⁵

Implementing agencies are required to adopt holistic approaches that consider the interplay of the different drivers of international cooperation and humanitarian action, and navigate complex relationships among various stakeholders. Impact is seldom achieved by the intervention in isolation, but rather is a confluence of different contributing actors (e.g., donors, partner organizations, governments, institutions, communities, groups) and contextual factors (e.g., social, political, cultural, economic, historical and environmental factors).¹⁶

Roles of international non-governmental organizations range between direct implementation and facilitation, often involving multiple partners. Single interventions are part of a broader portfolio. Contextual realities, unfolding situational events, as well as unexpected shocks to systems, imply non-linearity of change processes and demand for greater adaptability.¹⁷

Moreover, transformative changes that address underlying and structural causes of poverty and hunger and that align with the Sustainable Development Goals require longer-term approaches that promote good governance and empower civil society actors. Such approaches are often viewed as “risky,” as they are underpinned by only a few pre-tested change models (Theories of Change), their impact may span beyond the end of the intervention, and they often give rise to unintended consequences (not included in the

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.; VENRO, “Bundeshaushaltentwurf 2024,” 2023, https://venro.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Dateien/Daten/Publikationen/Studien_Berichte/VENRO_Analyse_Bundeshaushaltentwurf_2024.pdf.

10 OECD, “Development Co-Operation Report 2023: Debating the Aid System.”

11 OECD, “DAC Chair’s Priorities 2022-23,” 2022, <https://www.oecd.org/dac/development-assistance-committee/DAC%20Chair%20Priorities%2022-23.pdf>.

12 Brian Belcher and Markus Palenberg, “Outcomes and Impacts of Development Interventions: Toward Conceptual Clarity,” *American Journal of Evaluation* 39, no. 4 (December 6, 2018): 478–95, doi:10.1177/1098214018765698.

13 For Welthungerhilfe’s definition of systems, please refer to: Deutsche Welthungerhilfe e. V., “Welthungerhilfe’s Food System Framework - A Compass for Staff and Partners” (Bonn, 2023), https://www.welthungerhilfe.org/fileadmin/pictures/publications/en/project_and_professional_papers/2023-food-system-framework-welthungerhilfe.pdf.

14 USAID, “2022 Resilience Policy Revision: Draft as of December 2022,” n.d.

15 Robert Picciotto, “Have Development Evaluators Been Fighting the Last War... And If So, What Is to Be Done?,” *IDS Bulletin* 45, no. 6 (2014): 6–16, doi:10.1111/1759-5436.12109.

16 Barbara Befani, Ben Ramalingam, and Elliot Stern, “Introduction - Towards Systemic Approaches to Evaluation and Impact,” *IDS Bulletin* 46, no. 1 (2015): 1–6, doi:10.1111/1759-5436.12116.

17 Picciotto, “Have Development Evaluators Been Fighting the Last War... And If So, What Is to Be Done?”

intervention's planned change logic). Transformative changes are usually incremental and cumulative. They are built upon many smaller and more emergent changes to the underlying system that happen along the way to bigger and more important changes.¹⁸

Localization and local leadership: If we recognize and lever local capacities of local civil society actors, communities and people, whose impact are we measuring and who controls the assessment?

Localization¹⁹ emphasizes shifting power to local actors and fostering equitable partnerships. In evaluation, this means relinquishing control over the evaluation process and creating spaces that can be claimed by the impacted communities and people. Additionally, implementing organizations have been traditionally compelled by donors to claim credit for impact, and elevate their contribution for progress over other actors. This mindset, however, contradicts the principle of local leadership, which prioritizes shifting the responsibility for the impact to local actors (e.g. governments, civil society) and communities.²⁰

Participation: Are we measuring what matters for the people we work with?

Participation emphasizes broadening success metrics to reflect local experiences and priorities, ensuring that measurement frameworks consider the diverse perspectives and needs of the people involved in, and affected by, international cooperation and humanitarian assistance. It values and integrates local knowledge and practices, promoting the active involvement of project participants in defining and measuring progress. This approach supports self-determination and helps communities shape their own development pathways, ensuring that outcomes are meaningful and relevant to those involved in the interventions.²¹

Gender and human rights mainstreaming: How can we measure gender equality and human rights?

“Higher level changes, especially in gender norms, can take decades to materialize and might not be linear²². Applying a gender and human rights lens to impact analysis stipulates recognition of transformative changes related to socio-cultural, economic and political dynamics within systems, that otherwise hinder the fulfilment of rights and the empowerment of women, girls and marginalized groups in society.

TRACING THE UNDERSTANDING OF IMPACT WITHIN WELTHUNGERHILFE

At Welthungerhilfe, prior to the emergence of the term “impact”, project work often focused on and was motivated by the level of activities and outputs achieved (e.g. the number of wells built or courses held). In 2003, Welthungerhilfe published a concept paper on impact orientation titled “Impact-oriented evaluation of overseas co-operation by Deutsche Welthungerhilfe”²³, describing the organization's intention to monitor and evaluate the outcomes and impacts of its work. It emerged in response to the adjusted evaluation framework by the OECD, which for the first time introduced the levels of output, outcome, and impact.²⁴

Welthungerhilfe then commissioned a working group to promote the process of implementing outcome and impact-oriented planning, monitoring and (self-) evaluation in the organization. In 2008, the group

produced the orientation framework “Outcome and Impact Orientation in the Projects and Programmes of Welthungerhilfe”²⁵, which outlined Welthungerhilfe's understanding of outcome and impact at the time, and offered practical assistance with the implementation of outcome and impact orientation during the planning, monitoring, and evaluation of projects. The focus of this framework was on high-quality planning and monitoring of projects. As such, the main guidelines and messages of the framework are still useful for Welthungerhilfe projects; however, the framework neither offers guidance on when and how to evaluate impact in a way that would satisfy current academic and technical standards, nor on how the identification and evaluation of high-impact approaches can be leveraged to scale impact up and out. Of note, these guidelines were not intended to be a final publication on the topic of outcomes and impact but rather

18 Rob D. Van der Berg, Cristina Magro, and Silvia Salinas Mulder, “Evaluation for Transformational Change. Opportunities and Challenges for the Sustainable Development Goals” (Exeter, United Kingdom, 2019).

19 Welthungerhilfe defines the term “humanitarian localization” as “a paradigm shift that emphasizes shifting power to local actors and fostering equitable partnerships”.

20 Sarah Earl, Fred Carden, and Terry Smutylo, *Outcome Mapping. Building Learning and Reflection into Development Programs*. (Ottawa: IDRC, 2001).

21 Lea Corsetti, “Decolonising Evaluation Practice: Is It Time for an Increased Conversation in Europe?,” *European Evaluation Society Blog*, July 13, 2022, <https://europeanevaluation.org/2022/07/13/decolonising-evaluation-practice-is-it-time-for-an-increased-conversation-in-europe/>.

22 OECD, “Applying a Human Rights and Gender Equality Lens to the OECD Evaluation Criteria” (Paris, 2023), doi:<https://doi.org/10.1787/9aaf2f98-en>.

23 Deutsche Welthungerhilfe e. V., “Impact-Oriented Evaluation of Overseas Co-Operation by Deutsche Welthungerhilfe” (Bonn, 2003).

24 OECD, *Evaluation and Aid Effectiveness No. 6 - Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results Based Management* (in English, French and Spanish) (OECD, 2002), doi:10.1787/9789264034921-en-fr.

25 Deutsche Welthungerhilfe e. V., “Outcome and Impact Orientation in the Projects and Programmes of Welthungerhilfe” (Bonn, 2008), https://www.welthungerhilfe.de/fileadmin/pictures/publications/en/project_and_professional_papers/2008-guidelines-outcome-and-orientation-part-1.pdf#:~:text=The%20guiding%20principle%20of%20Welthungerhilfe%E2%80%99s%20outcome%20and%20impact-oriented,development%20co-operation%20with%20part-%20ners%20and%20target%20groups.

“a dynamic document”, which is “improved and added to on a continual basis”.²⁶

In 2010, a revision of the 2003 concept paper was published under the name “Outcome and Impact-oriented Evaluation of the Work of Welthungerhilfe”.²⁷ It provided a reference framework for evaluation theory and practice at the time, both in- and outside of Welthungerhilfe. However, it is fairly open in scope and limited with regards to the evaluation of impact. While it does raise the need for assessing the final benefits of interventions on the project target groups, including unintended and unexpected changes, it does not stipulate how this should be done.

Since then, Welthungerhilfe has devoted particular attention to designing practicable approaches to effectively measure and manage project success. In this regard, the organization launched its Measuring Success (#ms) framework in 2016, consisting of a set of quantitative indicators as well as qualitative methods to contextualize and interpret the quantitative data. The #ms framework serves as a suitable cross-section of all Welthungerhilfe’s projects and programs (as a global monitoring system), providing insights on outcomes rather than impact. In acknowledgment of the evolving nature of Welthungerhilfe’s efforts, particularly in responding to emergency situations and addressing cross-cutting issues like gender equality and climate resilience, the #ms framework underwent a comprehensive revision in 2022 aimed at maintaining alignment with Welthungerhilfe’s main areas of intervention. From this revision, a new qualitative tool, the Influence Matrix, was introduced into the framework to facilitate a systematic exploration of the causal pathways between higher-level outcomes and Welthungerhilfe’s intervention strategies. In 2022, the #ms framework results were reported for the first time in the public domain through Welthungerhilfe’s first ever Impact Report.²⁸

At the same time, Welthungerhilfe is shifting toward more systemic program approaches to make food and WASH systems more sustainable and resilient. The current Welthungerhilfe Strategy 2021-2024 proposes a holistic perspective on food systems, prioritizes work through partnerships and envisions addressing structural causes of hunger. Most recently, we launched our Food System Framework²⁹, which operationalizes our food systems transformation approach toward

sustainable and resilient food systems, and which is grounded in years of experience with systemic approaches. For example, the Sustainable Service Initiative, launched in 2017, aims to strengthen local government and service authorities in their functions at district levels by creating an enabling environment for WASH service delivery at policy levels and by advocating in the sector and partner countries for a more sustainable approach to WASH programming. Since 2018, Welthungerhilfe’s Nutrition Smart Communities program has been addressing the complex causes of hunger by creating nutritional awareness, leveraging agriculture to support nutrition, supporting community resource planning and mobilizing individuals, local organizations and governing bodies to collectively drive progress across villages in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Tajikistan, Ethiopia, Malawi, Sierra Leone and Burundi. Currently, there are 670 model villages established across Asia and Africa.

Our work is based on the Core Humanitarian Standard³⁰, which demands for actions based on learning, improvement, effectiveness, participation, and feedback, while also striving to minimize negative effects. In line with these principles, we recognize the need for adapting our impact evaluation practices to keep pace with the changes occurring in the programming domain of our organization and within the international cooperation and humanitarian action sector more broadly.

Welthungerhilfe aims to establish a definition of impact that:

- considers the contextual factors, recent discourses, and operational modalities within international cooperation and humanitarian action,
- is practical and reflective of living realities of the communities we work with,
- is supported by our staff and partners,
- guides programming decisions,
- considers our and our donors’ policies and strategies and, thus, respects current foci and cross-cutting issues,
- meets the current methodological standards of the evaluation field.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Deutsche Welthungerhilfe e. V., “Impact and Outcome-Oriented Evaluation of the Work of Welthungerhilfe” (Bonn, 2010).

²⁸ Deutsche Welthungerhilfe e. V., “Impact Report” (Bonn, 2022), <https://www.welthungerhilfe.org/news/publications/detail/impact-report>.

²⁹ Deutsche Welthungerhilfe e. V., “Welthungerhilfe’s Food System Framework - A Compass for Staff and Partners” (Bonn, 2023), https://www.welthungerhilfe.org/fileadmin/pictures/publications/en/project_and_professional_papers/2023-food-system-framework-welthungerhilfe.pdf.

³⁰ Group URD and the Sphere Project CHS Alliance, “Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability,” 2014, <https://corehumanitarianstandard.org/files/files/Core%20Humanitarian%20Standard%20-%20English.pdf>.



Jattu Kowneh, from Baoma Village in Kailahun District, carries a bowl of freshly harvested cocoa beans. Cocoa cultivation is crucial for the community, alongside rice and beans grown for personal use. Women primarily handle the harvesting and processing of cocoa, transforming it into finished beans. Welthungerhilfe has built facilities in Baoma where farmers can sort, ferment, and dry their cocoa beans, along with a storage building for the finished product. The cocoa is then sold to a social partner company that pays the farmers a fair organic cocoa price based on the world market rate, ensuring the added value stays with those who work throughout the value chain.

2. BENCHMARKING

SIX ATTRIBUTES OF IMPACT

Welthungerhilfe aims to make an informed and well explained decision regarding our definition of impact. As a basis, we have benchmarked how other actors in international cooperation and humanitarian action address the subject of impact. We reviewed 41 impact definitions of different international institutions, national development cooperation agencies,

non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and think tanks (detailed in Annex 1). To facilitate the analysis of the definitions, we proposed six attributes of impact outlined in Table 1, derived from the works of Hearn and Buffardi (2016)³¹ and Belcher and Palenberg (2018)³². These works provided us with a line of inquiry to analyze other actors' impact definitions.

Table 1: Attributes used to analyze impact definitions.

Attribute	Question	Application
Causality	Is there a (causal) link between the intervention and the change?	E.g., attribution and/or contribution, or otherwise indicating that the change was produced by the intervention
Subject of change	Where are we looking for change?	E.g., people, households, communities, organisations, systems
Intentionality	Are we looking for change on specific variables, or will we consider unintended or unanticipated changes?	E.g., anticipated and unanticipated, intended and unintended
Directness	How direct is the causal chain? How far from the intervention do we expect to see change?	E.g., direct or indirect, primary or secondary
Dimensions of change	Domain where impact is measured. Reach: How many are reached? Magnitude: How strong is the change? Duration: How long does the change last? Equity: How equal is the change across subjects?	E.g. All project participants The size of the effect E.g. Long-term E.g. Gender-equitable
Beneficiality	Was the change beneficial for the affected group?	E.g., positive or negative, (ir)relevant

CAUSALITY IS THE CORE ATTRIBUTE OF IMPACT

An analysis of the 41 impact definitions against the six impact attributes revealed that causality is the most widely used attribute, with consistent (100%) reference across all reviewed definitions (Figure 1). The other five impact attributes were used disproportionately less, and their application exhibited

great variability. But what does causality mean, and why is it so important? Causality “seeks to connect cause with effect”³³. In the conventional framework of impact evaluation, the cause is the intervention³⁴, for example, a WASH intervention, and the effect is the change in an outcome, such as an increase in the

31 Simon Hearn and Anne L. Buffardi, “What Is Impact?” (London, 2016), <https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/10352.pdf>.

32 Belcher and Palenberg, “Outcomes and Impacts of Development Interventions: Toward Conceptual Clarity.”

33 Stern et al., “Broadening the Range of Designs and Methods for Impact Evaluations.”

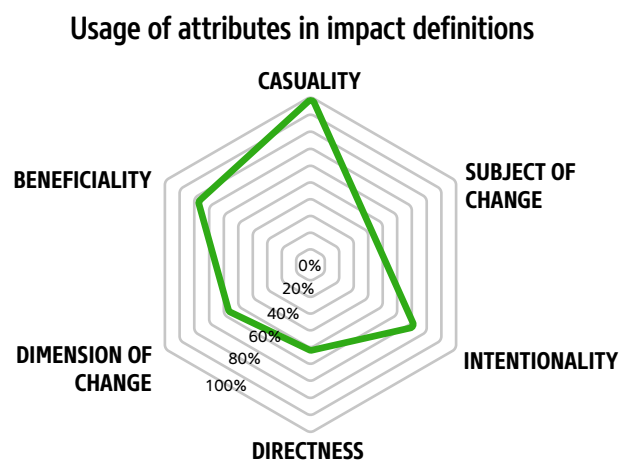
34 “Intervention” describes a deliberate involvement in a process or system intended to influence events and/or consequences. The term may refer to single activities but often refers to sets of activities organized within a project, program, or instrument.” (Belcher & Palenberg, 2018)

number of households using at least basic drinking water services (#ms4).³⁵ Causality then determines whether, to what extent, and how the intervention played a role in bringing about the change.

Causality goes beyond a connection between the intervention and the observed change. Merely observing a change in an outcome that is desired by the intervention in place does not imply causality. It could be that a change occurred while the intervention was being implemented but was due to causes or reasons unrelated to it. For example, the previously mentioned WASH intervention may have been put in place in promising communities where an upward trend of the use of basic drinking water services was already observed. In this sense, the intervention may not have played any role in contributing to the observed increase in the use of basic drinking water services. Causality requires establishing that the intervention brings about the effect – either as a necessary factor (the change can only occur with the intervention), as a sufficient factor (the intervention may on its own

may produce the change), or as a contributory factor (the intervention is neither sufficient nor necessary, but together with other factors brings about the change).³⁶

Figure 1: Share of impact definitions that contain the respective attributes.
Source: own data collection of 41 impact definitions (Annex 1 and 3)



EMPHASIZING CAUSALITY FOR A CLEAR AND PRACTICAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN IMPACT AND OUTCOME

While all the actors whose definitions we analyzed include causality in their impact definitions, an initial analysis of outcome definitions highlighted a divergence in the referencing of causality in outcome definitions. Our anecdotal analysis³⁷ of 12 outcome definitions (29% of the 41 definitions in the sample) revealed that half of the actors (6 of the 12, specifically OECD, ICRC, Action Against Hunger, Brot für die Welt, Agiamondo, Kindernothilfe) also use causality in their definitions of outcomes. As a result, outcomes are seen as effects of outputs, and impact is seen as an effect of outcomes.³⁸ What distinguishes outcome and impact in the definitions of these actors is the **emphasis on the level of change**: they characterize impact as “higher-level” or “long-term”, while outcomes are seen as “short- and medium-term”, as illustrated in Figure 2a.

This approach of emphasizing the level of change can be critiqued for two reasons:

Firstly, it is ambiguous and largely subjective to identify when a “higher-level” or “long-term” change has occurred, making outcomes and impact hardly distinguishable in practice. These terms are subjective and

lack a fixed, specific, and widely accepted definition. In practical terms, the interpretation of what is “long-term” can vary greatly between contexts and actors.³⁹ Additionally, it is unclear whether these temporal terms “refer to the time of onset, the longevity of changes, or to a combination of both”⁴⁰. If these terms refer to the longevity (or duration) of changes, then outcomes indicate passing changes and impact signifies long-lasting changes. This interpretation implies that outcomes may precede impact, but they may equally occur after impact.⁴¹ This effectively contradicts the overall logic of the approach emphasizing the level of change to distinguish between impact and outcomes.

Secondly, this approach implies a requirement to establish a causal link through evidence at every level of the result chain – a condition difficult to satisfy in practice. Actors who use causality in both outcome and impact definitions (and distinguish between the concepts by emphasizing the level of change) cannot live up to their own definitions unless they employ sufficiently rigorous measurement methods that establish a causal link (between both outcomes and interventions, and between impact and outcomes) beyond a reasonable level of doubt.

35 Measuring Success is Welthungerhilfe’s global monitoring framework for defining what success means for Welthungerhilfe and how it can be measured.

36 Ibid.; M. S. Reed et al., “Evaluating Impact from Research: A Methodological Framework,” *Research Policy* 50, no. 4 (May 1, 2021): 104147, doi:10.1016/J.RESPOL.2020.104147.

37 We have conducted a search for outcome definitions of all actors in the sample, however not sufficiently thorough and systematic. Therefore, the selection of the actors whose outcome definitions we reviewed is guided by the accessibility and discoverability of their outcome definitions.

38 Belcher and Palenberg, “Outcomes and Impacts of Development Interventions: Toward Conceptual Clarity.”

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

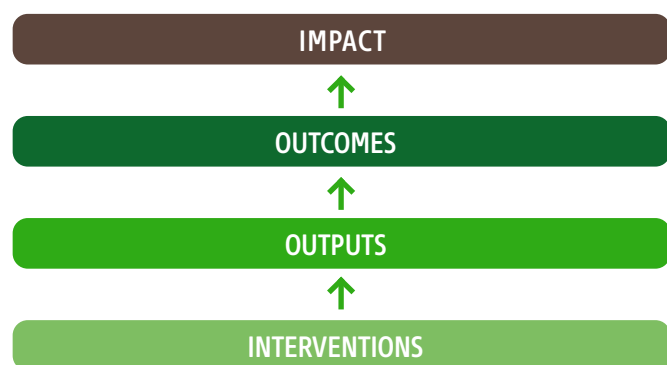
A more practical and conceptually coherent approach for distinguishing between outcomes and impact, as applied by the World Bank, WFP, USAID and 3ie, involves **emphasizing causality**. Through this approach, causal effect is only referred to in the impact definition, and not in the outcome definition. This approach views outcomes as observable changes in variables of interest that only qualify as impact when causality is established through evidence, as illustrated in Figure 2b. In this sense, outcomes demand measurement of variables of interest that are **plausibly** linked to interventions. Measurement of impact

involves establishing that a causal link is **probable** using right-fit evidence to minimize the uncertainty about the interventions' contribution to the change. Perhaps the clearest terminology aligned with this interpretation is that of 3ie, who define outcome as "a variable, or variables, which measure the impact of the intervention" and impact evaluation as the "study of the attribution of changes in the outcome to the intervention".⁴² Here, an outcome represents a change in a variable, while impact studies the causal link between the outcome and the intervention.

Figure 2: Two possible approaches for distinguishing impact and outcomes

Fig 2a.

Differentiation between outcomes and impact, **emphasis on the level of change**



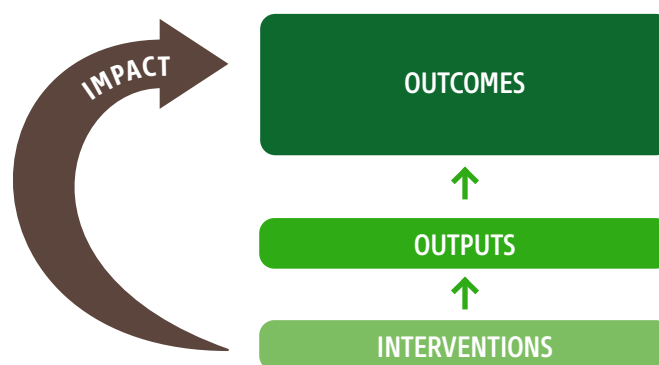
Inclusion criteria: (1) Definition of outcomes sets a condition of causality, and
(2) Definition of impact emphasizes level of change

Anchor examples: "high-level effects",
"ultimate effects",
"long-term effects"

Adopted by: ICRC, OECD, Action Against Hunger, Brot für die Welt, Agiamondo, Kindernothilfe ...

Fig 2b.

Differentiation between outcomes and impact, **emphasis on causality**



Inclusion criteria: (1) Definition of outcomes does not set a condition of causality, and
(2) Definition of impact includes a causal link between the intervention and the outcome

Anchor examples: "effects of the intervention on outcomes"
"changes in outcomes that can be attributed"

Adopted by: USAID, WFP, World Bank, 3ie ...

42 3ie, "3ie Impact Evaluation Glossary" (New Dehli, India, 2012), https://www.3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/impact_evaluation_glossary_-_july_2012_3.pdf.

THEORY GUIDES THE INVESTIGATION INTO CAUSALITY

A commonality between the two approaches distinguishing impact from outcomes is that they both include a theory outlining the underlying logical sequence of “the process leading from an initial condition to the final effect”⁴³, often expressed through a causal chain or a theory of change. Validation of the presumed changes along this underlying theory alone is not sufficient for establishing a causal link between the intervention and the change (mainly due to its susceptibility to biases and validity concerns). However, the theory does provide an explanation of how changes come about and sets a basis for an investigation of causal links.⁴⁴

Actors employing either of the two approaches for differentiating between outcomes and impact have developed taxonomy for distinguishing and classifying different levels of outcomes, such as World Bank, ICRC, CIDA. Perhaps the most elaborate of these is the World Bank’s Outcome Classification Framework⁴⁵, which is guided by a theory of change logic and defines 4 distinct levels for outcomes:

Level 1 - Outputs: activities and delivered outputs, such as the number of people trained or the number of people who received seeds.

Level 2 - Early Outcomes: immediate benefits to project participants, which follow quite directly from project outputs. Early outcomes would entail application of knowledge, skills and capabilities, as well as behavior changes, that may lead to early benefits for the project target groups.

Level 3 - Intermediate Outcomes: indirect changes of the project interventions that span beyond the direct control of the implementing organization, and that present meaningful changes in the lives of the project participants. They may have some initial ripple effects on a sector-wide scale. Intermediate outcomes include, for instance, improvements in service delivery; strengthened governance; or increases in agricultural productivity, yields, farmers’ income, or profitability.

Level 4 - Long-term Outcomes: characterized with systemic, national or cross-sector changes that influence the general well-being of the population. Outcomes of this type are underpinned by deeper and wider ripple effects than the intermediate outcomes. Examples of long-term outcomes can include sustained changes in service delivery, governance and citizens’ wellbeing, such as reduction in malnutrition among children.

DIFFERENT VIEWS ON CAUSALITY: ATTRIBUTION VS CONTRIBUTION

While all organizations in our sample use causality in their impact definitions, they diverge in their interpretations of causality. The two main approaches to interpret causality are summarized in Table 2. **Attribution** means that the intervention is inferred as the (dominant) cause of the change, and it measures the extent to which the change can be ascribed to the intervention⁴⁶. In contrast, **contribution** explores whether and

how an intervention has contributed to the realization of the change. Here, the intervention is seen as one contributing cause to the change, among many other causes in a complex system. This approach usually validates the underlying causal chain or theory of change while thoroughly examining other factors that may have contributed to the change, thus minimizing uncertainty about the intervention’s contribution.

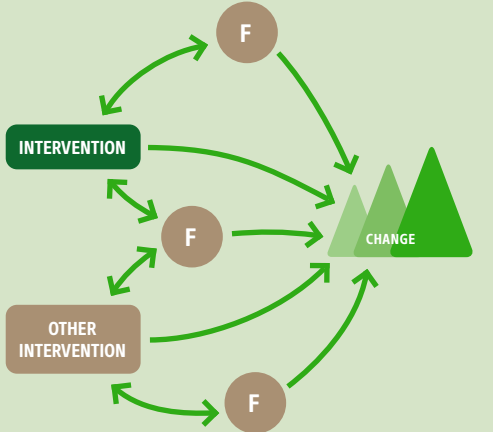
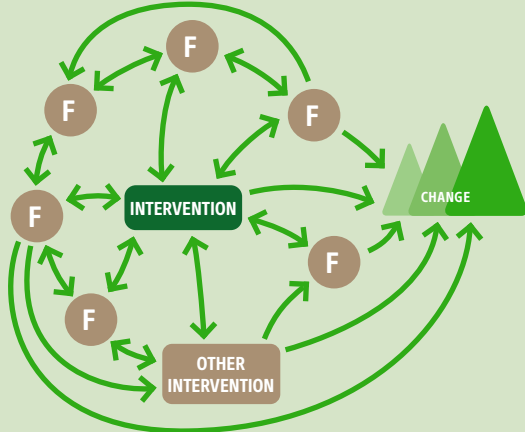
43 Barbara Befani, “Models of Causality and Causal Inference.” *DFID Working Paper 38*, 2012.

44 Ibid.

45 World Bank, “Results and Performance of the World Bank Group 2020.” (Washington DC, 2020), <https://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/sites/default/files/Data/Evaluation/files/RAP2020.pdf>.

46 Stern et al., “Broadening the Range of Designs and Methods for Impact Evaluations.”

Table 2: Attribution and contribution as the two main ways to understand causality. Graphic adapted from Unicef Evaluation Office 2023⁴⁷. Terminology adapted from Belcher and Palenberg 2018⁴⁸.

	Attribution	Contribution
Definition	The extent to which the observed change is the result of the intervention. ⁴⁹	The intervention is one (distant) contributing cause among many. ⁵⁰
	 <p>Exp.: "F" stands for factor.</p>	 <p>Exp.: "F" stands for factor.</p>
Example of causality claim	Drinking water made safe by chlorine solution reduces child mortality. ⁵¹	Norm-shifting intervention contributes to girls' changing roles, improved school outcomes and reduction of child marriage practices and related teen pregnancy. ⁵²
Terminology used in definitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Results and effects caused by an intervention - Results and effects attributable to an intervention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Change to which the intervention contributed - Change that the intervention influenced - Contributing causes indirectly related to the intervention

ACTORS ARE SPLIT BETWEEN ATTRIBUTION AND CONTRIBUTION THINKING

We classified the 41 reviewed definitions into four causality categories (as depicted in Annex 2). Whenever an explicit reference was not made to either of the two causal relationships, we sought to infer the appropriate category based on the terminology used in the impact definition. In addition to the two causality categories of "attribution" and "contribution", we

also created the categories of "both" (where both perspectives are accepted as possible ways how an intervention can relate to a change) and "vague" (where ambiguous terms are used and the perspective of causality is not specified). The distribution of organizations according to their view on causality is shown in Figure 3.

47 UNICEF, "UNICEF Evaluation of Impact. Strategy and Action Framework 2022–2025" (New York, 2023).

48 Belcher and Palenberg, "Outcomes and Impacts of Development Interventions: Toward Conceptual Clarity."

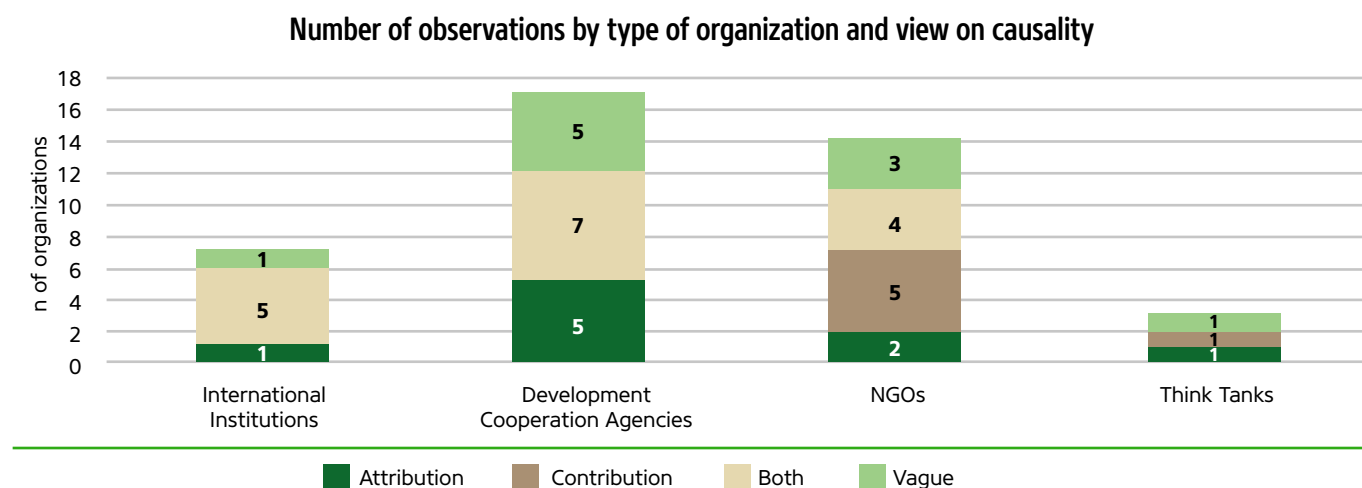
49 3ie, "3ie Impact Evaluation Glossary."

50 Belcher and Palenberg, "Outcomes and Impacts of Development Interventions: Toward Conceptual Clarity."

51 Four years of community-wide provision of dilute chlorine solution in rural Kenya reduces all-cause under-5 mortality by 1.4 percentage points, a 63% reduction relative to control." (Haushofer, Kraemer, Maertens and Tan, 2021, J-PAL)"

52 Susan Igras et al., "Realist Evaluation of Social and Behaviour Change Interventions: Co-Building Theory and Evidence of Impact," *African Evaluation Journal* 10, no. 1 (November 21, 2022), doi:10.4102/aej.v10i1.657.

Figure 3: View on causality by type of organization



Organizations in the field are divided in their contrasting viewpoints on causality as attribution (of the effect to the intervention) or contribution (of the intervention to the effect). International institutions tend to perceive causality as encompassing both attribution and contribution. Development cooperation agencies lean towards viewing causality as either attribution alone, or as both attribution and contribution. NGOs demonstrate a tendency toward interpreting causality as contribution, and their understanding of causality is also more diverse compared to other actors.

Overall, the most widely used perspective on causality, adopted by 15 of the 41 organizations (37%), recognizes that causal link may involve both attribution and contribution. This perspective is largely influenced by the revised OECD/DAC terminology introduced in 2019.^{53,54} The explanatory notes accompanying this revision specify that the definition of impact

now encompasses both perspectives on causality, in comparison to the more ambiguous preceding version of the definition from 2002. Overall, 9 of the 15 actors (60%) who view causality as an encompassing concept of both attribution and contribution have adopted the OECD/DAC impact definition, including all but one development cooperation agencies in this category.

The out-of-date 2002 OECD/DAC definition of impact^{55,56}, with its unclear stance on what causality means⁵⁷, also continues to shape the definitions of many organizations. 5 of the 10 actors (50%) categorized as having a vague view of causality still use the obsolete 2002 OECD/DAC wording. Also 5 of the 9 organizations (56%) that perceive causality as attribution continue to employ the 2002 OECD DAC definition - they simply incorporate an additional clause implying attribution. This is also the case for 3 out of the 5 development cooperation agencies.

CONTRIBUTION-MINDED ACTORS EMBRACE A MORE SYSTEMIC OUTLOOK ON IMPACT

The view on causality also shapes the way how other impact attributes are addressed in the impact definitions. Annex 3 details the coverage of attributes by organization and aggregates them according to the different causality categories. Specifically, actors who view causality either exclusively as contribution, or in addition to attribution, tend to have a broader and more holistic understanding of other attributes that describe what impact is, as described below:

The **subject of change** is limited to the household or individual level for definitions that restrict causality to

attribution. Definitions that encompass contribution (either solely or alongside attribution) open their subject of change to levels and subjects beyond the individual (as relevant for systemic changes).

Those actors who recognize only attribution as a possible causality link only cover one **dimension of change** (if any) in their impact definitions – namely, duration. The impact dimensions are more comprehensively covered by actors who accept contribution as a possible causal relationship. Some of them even allude also to size and equity in their impact definitions.


53 OECD/DAC 2019 definition without its explanatory notes: “The extent to which the intervention has generated or is expected to generate significant positive or negative, intended or unintended, higher-level effects”.

54 OECD, “Better Criteria for Better Evaluation. Revised Evaluation Criteria Definitions and Principles for Use,” 2019.

55 OECD/DAC 2002 definition: “Positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended.”

56 OECD, *Evaluation and Aid Effectiveness No. 6 - Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results Based Management (in English, French and Spanish)*.

57 Stern et al., “Broadening the Range of Designs and Methods for Impact Evaluations.”



Fred Ssebadduka is a Ugandan farmer and trader. He uses the AgriShare app developed by Welthungerhilfe to rent irrigation systems for watering his crops, and to hire trucks for transporting agricultural produce from farms to market. AgriShare is a digital platform designed to enhance agricultural efficiency and accessibility by connecting small-scale farmers with agricultural equipment manufacturers, service providers, and dealers. The app allows farmers to hire essential machinery and services that they might otherwise be unable to afford. By facilitating these connections, AgriShare helps farmers improve their productivity and more effectively manage their agricultural activities. Operating as a social business, the app generates revenue through transaction commissions, ensuring its sustainability beyond the project period.

3. WELTHUNGERHILFE'S NEW IMPACT AND OUTCOME TERMINOLOGY

DEFINITIONS OF OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

Welthungerhilfe's new Impact & Outcome terminology has been informed by the results of the benchmarking study, a gap analysis of Welthungerhilfe's previous definitions (described in Annexe 4), as well as a comprehensive consultation process involving our

staff and partner organizations (described in Annex 5). The outcome and impact definitions are interconnected and they complement each other through the attributes that they cover (outlined in Table 3 below).

Figure 4: Welthungerhilfe's new Outcome and Impact definition

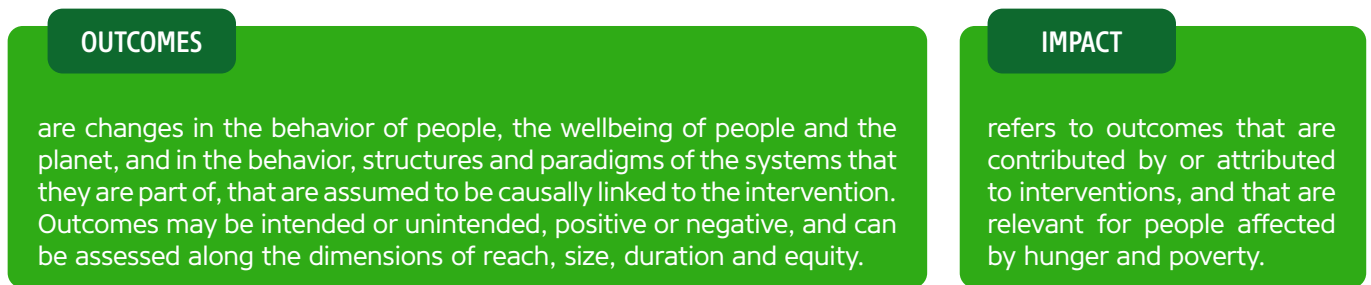


Table 3: Analysis of Welthungerhilfe's new Outcome and Impact definitions using the six impact attributes

	Outcome	Impact
Impact and outcome distinction	n.a.	“impact refers to outcomes that are contributed by or attributed to” (in other words, causal link between the intervention and the outcome)
Causality	“that are assumed to be linked to the intervention”	“outcomes contributed by or attributed to interventions”
Subject of change	“behavior and wellbeing of people and the planet, and in the patterns, structures and paradigms of systems that they are part of”	n.a.
Directness	n.a.	n.a.
Intentionality	n.a.	“intended or unintended”
Dimensions of change	n.a.	“Reach, size, duration and equity”
Beneficiality	n.a.	“relevant for the people affected by hunger and poverty” “positive or negative”

Explanatory note:

Outcomes and impact are distinguished based on the **substantiation of causal linkages**.

Outcomes are described as changes, or “any event or variation in the state of affairs”⁵⁸, that are assumed to be linked to an intervention. The causal link between outcomes and the intervention is **plausible based on priorly existing evidence, knowledge, or theoretical deduction**. The causal link does not need to be established through new evidence for a change to be labeled as outcome. To that end, outcomes only demand measurement and reporting on changes in variables of interest that are plausibly linked to the intervention.

The central element of **the impact definition is a requirement to establish causality** (causal links) between the intervention and the outcome **through evidence**, with **both attribution and contribution** as possible perspectives on causality. Impact – i.e. outcomes that are causally linked to interventions through evidence – may occur whether we are aware of it or not, and whether we measure it or not. However, when are unaware of it or when no measurement of it has occurred, we refrain from labeling it as impact.

The **subjects of change of the impact definition are covered by the outcome definition**. This is the case because impact is described as outcomes that are evidently causally linked with the intervention. The subject of change remains open to **changes in individuals, populations, the planet, as well as systems**. The definition consciously includes different outcome levels, including intermediate (people’s behavior), higher level (wellbeing of people and the planet) and systemic level (system behavior, structures, and paradigms). These are further explained in Welthungerhilfe’s “Impact and Outcome Classification Scheme” in the subsequent section of this chapter.

IMPACT AND OUTCOME CLASSIFICATION SCHEME

The Impact and Outcome Classification Scheme in Figure 5 provides guidance for classifying outcomes and impact as a lens for planning, analyzing, and evaluating changes. It is based on a theory of change logic to establish outcome levels that are

The outcome definition emphasizes the **search for both intended and unintended, as well as positive and negative changes**. These may qualify as positive or negative, intended or unintended impact if the outcomes are causally linked to the intervention.

Both definitions **consciously omit reference to directness**, as we deem it irrelevant to distinguish between direct and indirect changes. Our interventions typically interact with various factors and actors contributing to various extents in bringing about a change.

The outcome definition **sets accent on assessing change along multiple dimensions** (reach, size, duration and equity). It does not assign values to the dimensions, instead, it refers to them as the domains to assess (i.e., “judge the amount, value, quality or importance”⁵⁹) the change. In other words, the dimensions of reach (how many are reached), magnitude (the size of the change), duration (how long the change lasts) and equity (how equitable the change is across groups) can be used to make a judgment about the value or meaningfulness of the concrete change that we measure.

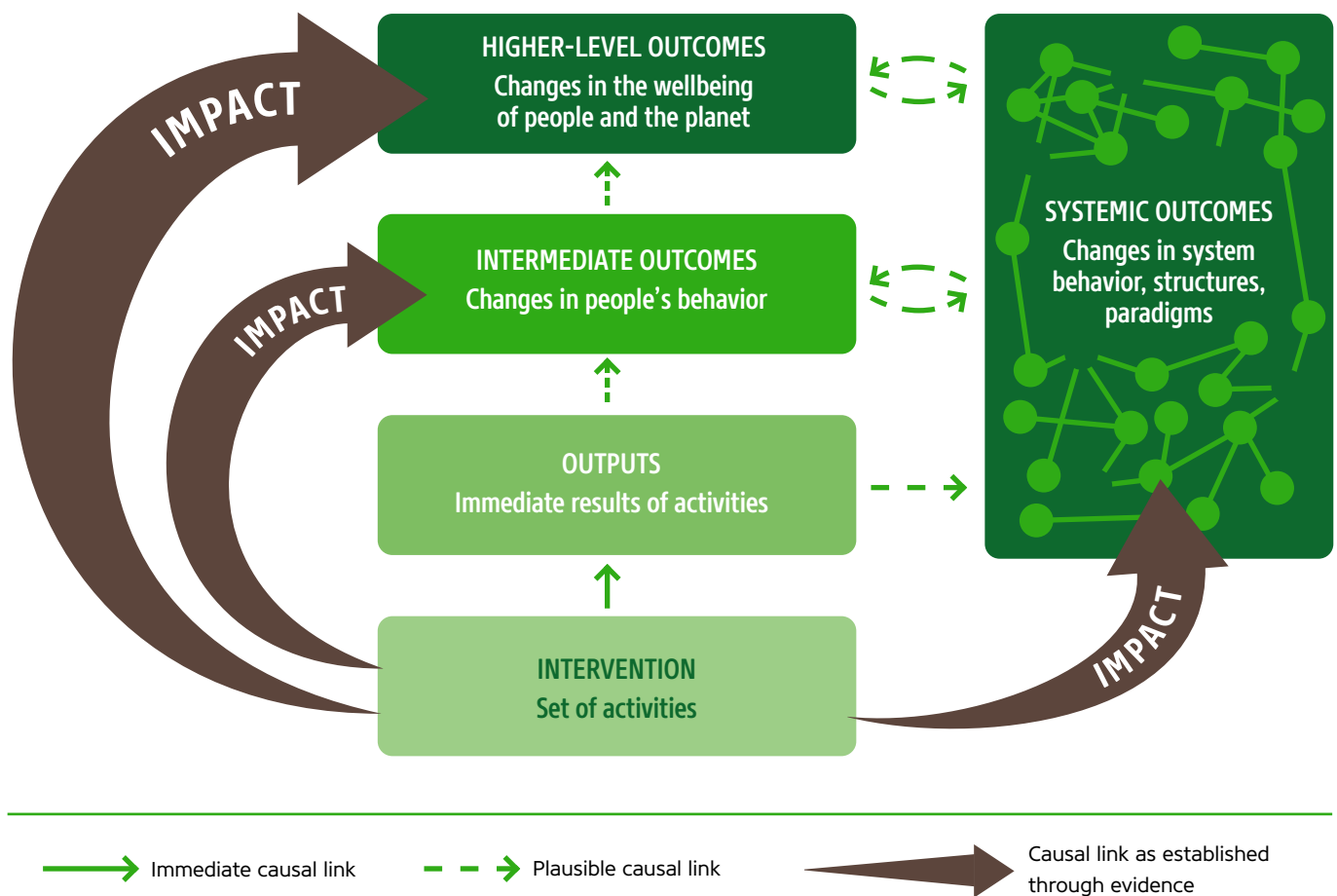
A paramount criterion of impact is its relevance to the people affected by hunger and poverty. The new definition emphasizes our people-centered focus and alignment with the decolonization movement, since it demands that **impact assessment entails soliciting the perspectives of those affected by our interventions to demonstrate that we are examining what is important for them**. We intentionally do not emphasize that impact needs to be relevant only to people affected by hunger and poverty who we work with, as we aim to remain receptive to possible impacts affecting individuals (affected by hunger and poverty) **beyond the targeted scope of our interventions** and intervention regions.

complementary, that align with Welthungerhilfe’s interventions and that reflect the environment in which our interventions operate. Practical examples of outcomes across the different levels of the Outcome Classification Scheme are then provided in Table 4.

⁵⁸ Belcher and Palenberg, “Outcomes and Impacts of Development Interventions: Toward Conceptual Clarity.”

⁵⁹ Cambridge Dictionary, “Assess,” n.d., <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/assess>.

Figure 5: Welthungerhilfe's Impact and Outcome Classification Scheme



Explanatory note:

The requirement for evidence of impact: Impact requires that causality between an intervention and an outcome is established through evidence (by means of attribution or contribution). To establish causality, right-fit evidence must be generated that examines factors which may have influenced the change (since interventions may not be the only causal factors), and that minimize uncertainty about the intervention's influence to the fullest extent possible. In this process, a theoretical change logic outlining the causal pathway from the intervention through to the highest-level outcomes (e.g. a theory of change) is crucial, as it aids guiding the impact assessment. This model also implies that an intervention can have multiple impacts at different levels. By aiming to minimize uncertainty to the fullest extent possible, we promote the use of impact evaluation. Based on the same principle, we encourage the use of other methods to trace causal linkages between outcomes and interventions where impact evaluation is not sensible. One example of a method that produces weaker evidence of impact but that can be used as a 'smell test' where impact evaluation is not possible or where interventions that were previously impact-evaluated are being replicated are 'influence matrices'.

Outcomes are changes assumed to be linked to interventions: Outcomes demand for measurement of changes in variables of interest that are assumed to be causally linked to the intervention based on prior evidence, knowledge, or theoretical deduction. However, they do not require that the causal link between the intervention and the change is established with new evidence for the change to be labeled as an outcome, so long as the causal link is plausible based on prior evidence, knowledge, or theoretical deduction. That notwithstanding, we encourage the application of right-fit methods to establish evidence of causal links where possible.

The path to higher-level outcomes matters: Higher-level outcomes constitute changes in the wellbeing of people and the planet, reflecting Welthungerhilfe's purpose. However, the way to these higher-level outcomes is long and winding. In striving for changes in wellbeing of people and the planet (higher-level outcomes), interventions frequently need to target changes in people's behavior (intermediate outcomes) as well as in systems (systemic outcomes). Interactive links (either reinforcing or undermining) may also exist between changes in individuals' behavior and systemic changes.

Intermediate outcomes represent people's behavior changes: Intermediate outcomes refer to changes in people's behavior, including changes in attitudes and practices. In practical terms, the assessment of changes in behavior and practices may follow the same methodology. Attitudes are more intricate. They are mutually interdependent with behavior changes, meaning they interact and reinforce each other. They may also be, but not always, predictors of behavior⁶⁰, and they may or may not signal systemic changes (specifically, changes in system paradigms, which are further explained below). Since attitude changes are essentially internal personal transformations, their measurement usually relies on self-reporting.

Systemic outcomes as leverage points for shifts in system trajectory: Systemic outcomes reflect changes in system behavior, structures and paradigms, categories derived from Donella Meadows' leverage points in a complex system to enhance effectiveness of interventions⁶¹. These categories serve as a tool for recognizing the occurrence of systemic changes and their further leveraging. At the same time, the three categories are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, therefore, they shouldn't be applied too rigidly. Thus, consideration of the uncertain and non-linear nature of the interactions among these categories is essential for their practical use. Noteworthy may also be that all systems in which Welthungerhilfe intervenes have a social system component. The three categories to recognize the occurrence of systemic changes are:

- 1. Changes in system behavior** refer to changes in the interactions between system elements. At its basis, elements are key variables that are associated with the system as a whole, sub-systems, or groups of actors within the system. We speak of system behavior, as opposed to behavioral and wellbeing outcomes, when changes in the interactions between elements occur. Examples of changes in system behavior include changes in speed (e.g. how fast agricultural produce is sold after harvest), reliability (e.g. how often infrastructure breaks down or how regularly communities are consulted by government officials), scale (e.g. the number of mothers that can access nutrition referral services or changes in demand and supply), efficiency (e.g. productivity, profit margins), quality (e.g. food safety), or system adaptability (e.g. responsiveness of service providers to feedback or anticipation and reaction time to disasters).
- 2. Changes in system structures** include changes in the connections, relationships, and organization within a system. Examples of changes in system structures include changes in who interacts with

whom, the strength of trust in networks, the rules, regulations and norms governing a system, or the introduction of new actors or institutions⁶² in the system.

- 3. Changes in paradigms** involve alterations in the priorities, goals, values, assumptions and accepted truths, and shared narratives. Paradigms, while deep-seated and not always immediately related to wellbeing outcomes, lay the foundation of a system's structure and behavior and can thus be highly relevant for system transformation. For instance, the increasingly accepted truth that the food is more expensive than its actual production cost when factoring in health and environmental cost is beginning to lead to a shift in global narratives toward food systems, and a shift in policy priorities and regulations (e.g. the "nutri-score" traffic light system that is supposed to indicate the nutritional value of food). Another example is change in the perceived urgency of climate change that was catalyzed by Fridays for Future and related movements, which likely contributed to major changes in policies and practices (e.g. the EU Green Deal).

Outputs are the immediate results of activities: An output refers to the immediate results of activities. Much like interventions, outputs are located within the sphere of control: They are an almost certain consequence of the intervention, meaning that the intervention has control over whether and to what extent the output is realized. For instance, an activity of building wells may yield a deliverable of 10 built wells and an output of 500 community members gaining access to clean drinking water.

Adapting outcome classification for real-world complexity: The classification figure is not exhaustive in capturing all the different influences and factors that are evident in the real world. The classification is simplified and needs to be interpreted flexibly. Complex programs may entail even more levels of outcomes (additional intermediate and higher-level outcomes may need to be added), while simpler or smaller projects may benefit from inclusion of lower-level outcomes and/or incorporation of some of the existing outcome levels (for examples, systemic or higher-level outcomes may be cut off). Note that Theories of Change are management tools. As such, they aim at reducing complexity and at displaying necessary interrelationships between variables of interest so that the targeted changes in outcomes can be achieved. A theory of change need not display more complexity than is necessary to achieve its targeted outcomes.

60 Dolores Albarracín and Sharon Shavitt, "Attitudes and Attitude Change," *Annual Review of Psychology* 69, no. 1 (January 4, 2018): 299–327, doi:10.1146/annurev-psych-122216-011911.

61 Donella H. Meadows, *Thinking in Systems - A Primer*, ed. Sustainability Institute Diana Wright, 2008.

62 As clarified by institutionalism.

Table 4: Practical examples of outcomes across different levels of Welthungerhilfe's outcome classification (non-exhaustive, partial representation of changes at various levels)

	Outputs immediate results of activities (non-exhaustive selection, as other outputs would be needed in realizing the outlined outcomes)	Intermediate outcomes changes in people's behavior.	Higher-level outcomes changes in the well-being of people and the planet	Systemic outcomes changes in system behavior, structures, paradigms
Nutrition	Project participants are sensitized on the importance of healthy, diversified diets feeding throughout the life-cycle and on improved caring practices.	Project participants consume a year-round diversified healthy diet with adequate intra household food distribution, and timely utilization of health care services, Communities demand quality basic nutrition services.	Improved nutrition situation / improved nutrition status.	System behavior change: The scale and quality with basic nutrition services increases. Structure change: Local government restructures and increases funding for/ improves the quality of the nutrition service delivery. Paradigm change: Governments and citizens adopt a sustainable planetary healthy diet for all.
Agriculture	Farmers are trained in improved agricultural techniques and access agricultural inputs such as improved seeds and irrigation tools. They are trained on how to produce compost and biopesticides based on locally available resources.	Farmers participating in project activities reduce their reliance on chemical pesticides and fertilizers. They diversify their crops, improving soil health.	Increased agricultural productivity, crop yields, farmers' income and profitability.	System behavior change: Reduced production loss due to adapted seeds, reduced cost of production due to improved soil fertility, reduced cost of food. Structure change: Smallholder farmers self-organize into agricultural cooperatives to pool their resources, share knowledge and collectively negotiate with buyers. Agricultural policies at the regional or national levels incorporate more sustainable farming practices. Paradigm change: Wider communities (incl. farmers not participating in project activities) shift towards sustainable farming practices.

	<p>Outputs immediate results of activities (non-exhaustive selection, as other outputs would be needed in realizing the outlined outcomes)</p>	<p>Intermediate outcomes changes in people's behavior.</p>	<p>Higher-level outcomes changes in the well-being of people and the planet</p>	<p>Systemic outcomes changes in system behavior, structures, paradigms</p>
<p>WASH</p>	<p>Project participants are sensitized to use safe WASH services. Service providers are trained to improve WASH service delivery.</p>	<p>Project participants start using basic sanitation services and basic drinking water services.</p>	<p>Decrease in water-related illnesses.</p>	<p>System behavior change: Government officials are continuously and progressively more responsive to people's demands and complaints. Structure change: Establishment of a regulatory authority or a government agency responsible for overseeing and regulating WASH services at district or national levels. Paradigm change: Transition from centralized planning to decentralized participatory and data driven planning cycles of governmental actors to plan, budget for and support ongoing WASH service delivery.</p>
<p>Governance & civil society empowerment</p>	<p>Public are made aware (e.g. through public awareness campaigns) about their rights. Public authority workers are trained on their roles & responsibilities to meet people's rights.</p>	<p>Women raise their concerns in community meetings. Local community leaders attend public meetings and report communities' concerns to the authorities. Public authorities address concerns raised.</p>	<p>Improved access, quality, and reliability of service delivery</p>	<p>System behavior change: Increase in complaints against corruption and discriminatory behavior; increased responsiveness of authorities. Structure change: Communities establish inclusive community-led committees to represent them. Authorities open new mechanisms for the communities to give feedback and demand their rights. Policy changes are enacted that support good governance practices. Paradigm change: The government includes public participation and grievance redressal mechanisms across their legal frameworks.</p>
<p>Advocacy</p>	<p>Meetings are organized between civil society actors and decision-makers. Journalists are engaged on the topic. Advocacy materials are developed and disseminated.</p>	<p>Civil society allies actively collaborate in their advocacy for policy change. Media draw public attention to the issue at stake. Decision-makers influence their political circles to adopt a policy.</p>	<p>People benefit from entitlements/ resources granted by a new policy.</p>	<p>System behavior change: Authorities (e.g. civil servants) invite civil society network for regular information exchange and consultation. Structure change: Civil society allies formalize their network. Legislative, policy changes or broader sectoral reforms are enacted. Paradigm change: New mindset among policymakers and the public.</p>


4. OUTLOOK: IMPACT AS A FOUNDATION FOR SYSTEM-BASED PROGRAMMING

In this paper, we have employed systematic methodology to synthesize conceptual understanding of impact by actors within international cooperation and humanitarian action as a basis for our own refinement of impact and outcome definitions. The framing of the impact and outcome relationship, the view on causality and the description of other impact attributes ultimately sets the foundation for us to leverage holistic system-based programming approaches. Impact definitions may also stimulate mainstreaming gender equality and human rights principles, strengthening local ownership, tackling power imbalances and building resilient systems within our evaluation practice as well as programming.

Our new definitions of impact, outcome, and the relationship between the two, recognize the complex nature of international cooperation. The new terminology does not restrict impact to end changes; instead, it puts causality at the heart, fostering a culture of reflection and learning about our role in bringing about changes of all sorts – from smaller alterations to larger transformations. It promotes thinking beyond the single project and beckons us to

contemplate the holistic journey of systemic change. It is grounded in our vision of intervening in systems where a small shift could lead to a big positive change. Concrete practical implications of these definitions for Welthungerhilfe’s practitioners are outlined in the “*Defining Impact: Practitioner’s Brief*” edition of this publication.

But how do we ultimately evaluate what change is bigger than another, especially when we embrace a wide spectrum of potential impacts? How do we measure the changes that reflect our interpretation of impact? And what strategies can we employ to effectively scale the impactful positive changes, while identifying and limiting adverse effects? These critical topics will be explored in more detail in the upcoming Episodes of the “Impact Paper Series” titled “Measuring Impact” and “Scaling Impact” - as further tools to guide our quest of creating a world where every individual can lead a self-determined life in dignity and justice, free from hunger and poverty.



Husna Hazarav, 22 years old, harvests grain that she was supported to grow under the Nutrition Smart Villages project in Rautahat District, Nepal. This initiative aims to improve nutrition and food security in Bangladesh, Nepal, and India. By promoting sustainable farming practices and collaborating with local governments, the project enhances health, nutrition, and agricultural outcomes for rural communities.

GLOSSARY

Attribution	The extent to which the observed change is the result of the intervention. ⁵⁸
Causality or Causal link	Causality “seeks to connect cause with effect” ⁵⁹ . It determines whether, to what extent and how an intervention played a role in bringing about a change. Observing a desired change in the presence of the intervention doesn’t inherently imply causality; instead, causality requires establishing through evidence that the intervention played a role in bringing about the change.
Contribution	The intervention is one (distant) contributing cause among many. ⁶⁰
Changes in system behavior	<p>Changes in system behavior refer to changes in the interactions between system elements. At its basis, elements are variables that are associated with the system as a whole, sub-systems, or groups of actors within the system. We speak of system behavior, as opposed to behavioral and wellbeing outcomes, when changes lie in the interactions between elements occur.</p> <p>Examples of changes in system behavior include changes in speed (e.g. how fast agricultural produce is sold after harvest), reliability (e.g. how often infrastructure breaks down or how regularly communities are consulted by government officials), scale (e.g. the number of mothers that can access nutrition referral services or changes in demand and supply), efficiency (e.g. productivity, profit margins), quality (e.g. food safety), or system adaptability (e.g. responsiveness of service providers to feedback or anticipation and reaction time to disasters).</p>
Changes in system structures	Changes in system structures include alterations in the relationships, connections, and organization within a system. Here, altering the rules and regulations governing a system, redesigning hierarchies and relationships between actors that influence system patterns and behavior, rules and regulations, or introducing new institutions ⁶¹ or structures can lead to changes in how the system behaves (meaning, alterations in system behavior).
Changes in system paradigms	Changes in system paradigms involve altering the fundamental assumptions, goals and priorities of the underlying system’s operation. For example, shifting the paradigm from a focus on economic growth at all costs to one that emphasizes sustainability and wellbeing can drive systemic changes in environmental policies and practices.
Higher-level outcomes	Higher-level outcomes are changes in the wellbeing of people and the planet, that are assumed to be causally linked to the intervention.
Localization	A paradigm shift that emphasizes shifting power to local actors and fostering equitable partnerships.
Impact	Impact refers to outcomes that are contributed by or attributed to interventions, and that are relevant for people affected by hunger and poverty.

58 3ie, “3ie Impact Evaluation Glossary.”

59 Stern et al., “Broadening the Range of Designs and Methods for Impact Evaluations.”

60 Belcher and Palenberg, “Outcomes and Impacts of Development Interventions: Toward Conceptual Clarity.”

61 As clarified by institutionalism.

Intermediate outcomes	Intermediate outcomes are changes in the behavior of people, that are assumed to be causally linked to the intervention.
Intervention	“A set of activities organized within a project, program, or instrument.” ⁶²
Key variable	A key variable is a factor, sector or market in a food system. Within our food systems approach, we zoom in and address specific key variables for system transformation. ⁶³
Outcomes	<p>Outcomes are changes in the behavior of people, the wellbeing of people and the planet, and in the behavior, structures and paradigms of the systems that they are part of, that are assumed to be causally linked to the intervention. Outcomes may be intended or unintended, positive or negative, and can be assessed along the dimensions of reach, size, duration and equity.</p> <p>The causal link between outcomes and the intervention is plausible based on priorly existing evidence, knowledge, or theoretical deduction. The causal link does not need to be established through new evidence for a change to be labeled as outcome.</p>
Outputs	Outputs refer to immediate results of activities.
System	A set of elements that form a whole, that are interrelated, interacting and interdependent, and that serve a common goal.
Systemic outcomes	Systemic outcomes are changes in the system behavior, structures and paradigms that people and the planet are part of, that are assumed to be causally linked to the intervention.
Theory of change	A theory outlining the underlying logical sequence of “the process leading from an initial condition to the final effect” ⁶⁴ .
Transformation	Transformation is a change in the patterns of system paradigms, structures and behavior, resulting in a trajectory change of systemic outcomes. Transformation is a continuous process.

62 3ie, “3ie Impact Evaluation Glossary.”

63 Deutsche Welthungerhilfe e. V., “Welthungerhilfe’s Food System Framework - A Compass for Staff and Partners”.

64 Barbara Befani, “Models of Causality and Causal Inference”.

ANNEXES

ANNEX 1: COMPLETE IMPACT DEFINITIONS AND SOURCES

ANNEX 2: CATEGORIZATION OF VIEWS ON CAUSALITY

ANNEX 3: COVERAGE OF ATTRIBUTES BY ORGANIZATION

ANNEX 4: GAP ANALYSIS

ANNEX 5: CONSULTATION PROCESS AND RESULTS

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 3ie. “3ie Impact Evaluation Glossary.” New Delhi, India, 2012. https://www.3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/impact_evaluation_glossary_-_july_2012_3.pdf.
- Albarracín, Dolores, and Sharon Shavitt. “Attitudes and Attitude Change.” *Annual Review of Psychology* 69, no. 1 (January 4, 2018): 299–327. doi:10.1146/annurev-psych-122216-011911.
- Befani, Barbara. “Models of Causality and Causal Inference.” DFID Working Paper 38, 2012.
- Befani, Barbara, Ben Ramalingam, and Elliot Stern. “Introduction - Towards Systemic Approaches to Evaluation and Impact.” *IDS Bulletin* 46, no. 1 (2015): 1–6. doi:10.1111/1759-5436.12116.
- Belcher, Brian, and Markus Palenberg. “Outcomes and Impacts of Development Interventions: Toward Conceptual Clarity.” *American Journal of Evaluation* 39, no. 4 (December 6, 2018): 478–95. doi:10.1177/1098214018765698.
- Berg, Rob D. Van der, Cristina Magro, and Silvia Salinas Mulder. “Evaluation for Transformational Change. Opportunities and Challenges for the Sustainable Development Goals.” Exeter, United Kingdom, 2019.
- Cambridge Dictionary. “Assess,” n.d. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/assess>.
- CHS Alliance, Group URD and the Sphere Project. “Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability,” 2014. <https://corehumanitarianstandard.org/files/files/Core%20Humanitarian%20Standard%20-%20English.pdf>.
- Corsetti, Lea. “Decolonising Evaluation Practice: Is It Time for an Increased Conversation in Europe?” *European Evaluation Society Blog*, July 13, 2022. <https://europeanevaluation.org/2022/07/13/decolonising-evaluation-practice-is-it-time-for-an-increased-conversation-in-europe/>.
- Deutsche Welthungerhilfe e. V. “Impact and Outcome-Oriented Evaluation of the Work of Welthungerhilfe.” Bonn, 2010.
- . “Impact Report.” Bonn, 2022. <https://www.welthungerhilfe.org/news/publications/detail/impact-report>.
- . “Impact-Oriented Evaluation of Overseas Co-Operation by Deutsche Welthungerhilfe.” Bonn, 2003.
- . “One Planet Zero Hunger. Strategy 2021-2024.” Bonn, 2021. <https://www.welthungerhilfe.org/news/publications/detail/welthungerhilfe-strategy-2021-2024/>.
- . “Outcome and Impact Orientation in the Projects and Programmes of Welthungerhilfe.” Bonn, 2008. https://www.welthungerhilfe.de/fileadmin/pictures/publications/en/project_and_professional_papers/2008-guidelines-outcome-and-orientation-part-1.pdf#:~:text=The%20guiding%20principle%20of%20Welthungerhilfe%E2%80%99s%20outcome%20and%20impact-oriented,development%20co-operation%20with%20part-%20ners%20and%20target%20groups.
- . “Welthungerhilfe’s Food System Framework - A Compass for Staff and Partners.” Bonn, 2023. https://www.welthungerhilfe.org/fileadmin/pictures/publications/en/project_and_professional_papers/2023-food-system-framework-welthungerhilfe.pdf.
- . “Wirkungsorientierung in Den Projekten Und Programmen Der Welthungerhilfe.” Bonn, 2008. https://www.welthungerhilfe.de/fileadmin/pictures/publications/de/project_and_professional_papers/2008_fachkonzept_wirkungsorientierung_leitfaden_01_hintergruende_definitionen.pdf.
- Earl, Sarah, Fred Carden, and Terry Smutylo. *Outcome Mapping. Building Learning and Reflection into Development Programs*. Ottawa: IDRC, 2001.
- Hearn, Simon, and Anne L. Buffardi. “What Is Impact?” London, 2016. <https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/10352.pdf>.
- Horner, Rory. “Towards a New Paradigm of Global Development? Beyond the Limits of International Development.” *Progress in Human Geography* 44, no. 3 (June 19, 2020): 415–36. doi:10.1177/0309132519836158.
- Igras, Susan, Mariam Diakité, Anjalee Kohli, and Carley Fogliani. “Realist Evaluation of Social and Behaviour Change Interventions: Co-Building Theory and Evidence of Impact.” *African Evaluation Journal* 10, no. 1 (November 21, 2022). doi:10.4102/aej.v10i1.657.
- Meadows, Donella H. *Thinking in Systems - A Primer*. Edited by Sustainability Institute Diana Wright, 2008.

- OECD. "Applying a Human Rights and Gender Equality Lens to the OECD Evaluation Criteria." Paris, 2023. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1787/9aaf2f98-en>.
- . "Better Criteria for Better Evaluation. Revised Evaluation Criteria Definitions and Principles for Use," 2019.
- . "DAC Chair's Priorities 2022-23," 2022. <https://www.oecd.org/dac/development-assistance-committee/DAC%20Chair%20Priorities%2022-23.pdf>.
- . "Development Co-Operation Report 2023: Debating the Aid System." Paris, 2023. doi:[10.1787/f6edc3c2-en](https://doi.org/10.1787/f6edc3c2-en).
- . Evaluation and Aid Effectiveness No. 6 - Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results Based Management (in English, French and Spanish). OECD, 2002. doi:[10.1787/9789264034921-en-fr](https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264034921-en-fr).
- Picciotto, Robert. "Have Development Evaluators Been Fighting the Last War... And If So, What Is to Be Done?" *IDS Bulletin* 45, no. 6 (2014): 6–16. doi:[10.1111/1759-5436.12109](https://doi.org/10.1111/1759-5436.12109).
- Reed, M. S., M. Ferré, J. Martin-Ortega, R. Blanche, R. Lawford-Rolfe, M. Dallimer, and J. Holden. "Evaluating Impact from Research: A Methodological Framework." *Research Policy* 50, no. 4 (May 1, 2021): 104147. doi:[10.1016/J.RESPOL.2020.104147](https://doi.org/10.1016/J.RESPOL.2020.104147).
- Stern, E., N. Stame, J. Mayne, K. Forss, R. Davies, and B. Befani. "Broadening the Range of Designs and Methods for Impact Evaluations." DFID Working Paper 38. , 2012. <https://www.gov.uk/research-for-development-outputs/dfid-working-paper-38-broadening-the-range-of-designs-and-methods-for-impact-evaluations#citation>.
- UNICEF. "UNICEF Evaluation of Impact. Strategy and Action Framework 2022–2025." New York, 2023.
- USAID. "2022 Resilience Policy Revision: Draft as of December 2022," n.d.
- VENRO. "Bundeshaushaltentwurf 2024," 2023. https://venro.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Dateien/Daten/Publikationen/Studien_Berichte/VENRO_Analyse_Bundeshaushaltentwurf_2024.pdf.
- World Bank. "Results and Performance of the World Bank Group 2020." Washington DC, 2020. <https://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/sites/default/files/Data/Evaluation/files/RAP2020.pdf>.

Note: the above bibliography does not include the definitions analyzed as part of the benchmarking study. The reviewed definitions and their sources are included in Annex 1.