



PLAUSIBLE CONTRIBUTION MEMO

Plausible contribution can be defined as the ability to establish credible causal claims that CLA helped a development program achieve the observed results. It suggests that a reasonable person would agree, from the evidence and the argument, that using CLA in program planning and implementation has made a difference in producing the intended development outcomes.

— J. Mayne (2012)

In its efforts to advance understandings of how to measure the effects and effectiveness of collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) on development results, the CLAIM Learning Network has identified a number of learning questions around assessing CLA's 'plausible contribution' to development outcomes. These include:

- What is plausible contribution?
- What methods can help us generate evidence of plausible contribution?
- What kinds of evidence are acceptable?
- Will Learning Network partners use common or different/multiple methodologies for assessing plausible contribution?

This short paper summarizes understandings of plausible contribution from the literature, identifies two complementary data analysis methods useful in measuring and assessing contribution, and develops a few practical tools and suggestions that could be used by Network partners to improve the rigor of findings and aggregate evidence across projects.

A brief review of the literature suggests that when making **plausibility judgements** people tend to focus on assessing whether the evidence: 1) fits well with prior knowledge; 2) provides a relatively simple and complete explanation; and 3) is corroborated by different sources (Connell & Keane, 2006). The literature on **evaluating contribution** recognizes complex causation and focuses more on discerning the influence and value of CLA (in relation to other influencing factors) to achieving the intended outcomes of development programs.

From a review of methodologies, **Contribution Analysis** (Mayne, 2012) and **Contribution Tracing** (Befani & Stedman-Bryce, 2016) emerge as two complementary data analysis methods that may be particularly relevant and useful for establishing plausible contribution. Used together, they highlight the importance of:

- a) **Conducting a context analysis** to identify influencing factors beyond the specific focus of study and unit of analysis that may provide alternative explanations for development outcomes or may be enablers or barriers to CLA.
- b) **Mapping your theory of change** and results chain to identify causal assumptions and potential risks within each link of the causal chain.

- c) **Identifying types of evidence needed to establish a causal claim** prior to conducting the study. This could involve using collaborative processes with stakeholders to identify evidence that would support or challenge each link or component in the project's TOC.
- d) **Using pre-established criteria to judge plausibility** of evidence that CLA contributed to development outcomes. For example, Learning Network participants could use a rating scale to assess agreement about plausible contribution of either specific evidence or an entire causal claim narrative.

CRITERIA	CONFIDENCE/CERTAINTY				
	VERY LOW	LOW	MEDIUM	HIGH	VERY HIGH
CONCEPT COHERENCE: fits well with prior knowledge	1	2	3	4	5
CORROBORATION: supported by different sources	1	2	3	4	5
CONSISTENCY: supported over time and across conditions	1	2	3	4	5
COMPLETENESS: sufficient detail and few gaps	1	2	3	4	5
SIMPLICITY: straightforward, uncomplicated explanations	1	2	3	4	5
MAGNITUDE: meaningful size and reach	1	2	3	4	5
INFLUENCING FACTORS: accounts for supporting and confounding factors	1	2	3	4	5
ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS: beats rival explanations	1	2	3	4	5
BIAS MITIGATION: addresses the risks of bias	1	2	3	4	5
USABILITY: has practical implications or policy relevance	1	2	3	4	5

Befani, B. and Stedman-Bryce, G. (2016) Process Tracing and Bayesian updating for impact evaluation. *Evaluation* 19 (2): 1–19;

Connell, L. & Keane, M. (2006). A Model of Plausibility. *Cognitive Science*, 30, 95–120;

Mayne, J. (2008). Contribution analysis: An approach to exploring cause and effect. The Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) Initiative.