

SPOTLIGHT ON THE UNFORESEEN

A FIVE-STEP METHODOLOGY FOR IMPROVING UPON UNINTENDED OUTCOMES

Authors: Arno Bratz, Thomas Scialfa, Jean Daniel | Organization: Mercy Corps | Contact: arno.bratz@gmail.com



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THE “I SEE TO ACT” METHODOLOGY (IC2A) consists of three components:

1. The five-step IC2A framework for improving upon unintended outcomes
2. The VCA-D typology to sort unintended outcomes into 8+ theoretically sound types
3. The VCA-D Matrix to facilitate action-planning based on unintended outcomes

1 IDENTIFY

What: Aggregate and screen qualitative and quantitative data sources to hypothesize outcomes.

How: Organize information from field trips, observations, reports and reflection sessions. Screen sources to hypothesize outcomes.

2 CLASSIFY

What: Sort outcomes into intended vs. unintended outcomes. Classify unintended outcomes using the VCA-D typology (see VCA-D matrix).

How: Apply structuring qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000).

3 INQUIRE

What: Identify and close knowledge gaps about the validity, generalizability and attributability of unintended outcomes.

How: Embed inquiries into existing qualitative and quantitative M&E systems.

4 CONFIRM

What: Confirm the validity and classification of the concerned outcomes in a second analysis round.

How: Validate the VCA-D classification of the outcome in a second, confirmatory qualitative data analysis round.

5 ACT

What: Decide on appropriate actions to improve the project’s theory of change or implementation practice.

How: Use the VCA-D matrix to identify appropriate actions.

Why Do We Need IC2A?

The aspiration: Development actors have an obligation to evaluate and act upon unintended outcomes to maximize impact and do no harm. This requires a methodology to evaluate and act upon unintended outcomes during implementation.

The trouble: Most evaluations do not consistently account for unintended outcomes (Bamberger et al., 2016). Most of evaluation methodologies that do (e.g. outcomes harvesting) are not well-suited to account for unforeseen unintended outcomes (Jabeen, 2018). The few that can (e.g. Most Significant Change) are not very strong at assessing negative unintended outcomes and the distribution of unintended outcomes in the participant population.

The VCA-D Matrix: Framing Unintended Outcomes for Improved Decision-Making

We developed eight a-priori types of unintended outcomes based on four theoretically and practically grounded dimensions: value (positive/negative) (Sherill, 1984), contribution (affects/does not affect intended outcomes), anticipation (anticipated/unanticipated) (Jabeen 2018), and distribution (affects participants/non-participants/systems) (Jabeen, 2018; Jervis, 1997; Merton, 1936). We treated distribution as a complementary sub-type (resulting in 24 sub-types). We then designed the below VCA-D to guide evidence-based action planning:

	Value	Contribution	Anticipation	
			Anticipated	Unanticipated
Positive		Promotes intended outcomes	Do nothing	Add to TOC and Reinforce
		Does not promote intended outcomes	Do nothing	Assess Outsourcing to Other Program
Negative		Does not inhibit intended outcomes	Mitigate against outcome	Add to risk register, mitigate against outcome
		Inhibits intended outcomes	Change implementation strategy	Add to TOC and risk register; redesign project

Pilot Case: Mercy Corps

We piloted IC2A in the South Kivu Food Security Project (FSP) in the DR Congo, led by Mercy Corps and funded USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance.

- Results:** While following IC2A, FSP
- Spotted relevant unintended outcomes that it would have otherwise missed
 - Reinforced positive and mitigate against negative unintended outcomes
 - Added new unintended outcomes to its theory of change.

- Examples of significant adaptive actions:**
- Started promoting an emerging practice among farmers to reinvest profit into livestock lending
 - Revised the project’s seeds procurement approach after confirming that promoted seeds had low emergence rates

Factors That Enabled the Success of IC2A

1. **Field practices:** A culture of curiosity and learning and a habit of documentation and discussion. Reflection questions after field visits.
2. **Typology:** A theoretically sound typology of unintended outcomes.
3. **Methodology:** A rigorous approach to identify, classify, further inquire, confirm and act upon unintended outcomes.
4. **Agile data collection:** Ability to flexibly integrate new inquiries into existing data collection tools and workflows.
5. **Evaluative thinking:** Application of rigorous designs, methods and processes systematically inquire outcomes emerging from anecdotal or informal evidence for validity, generalizability and attributability.