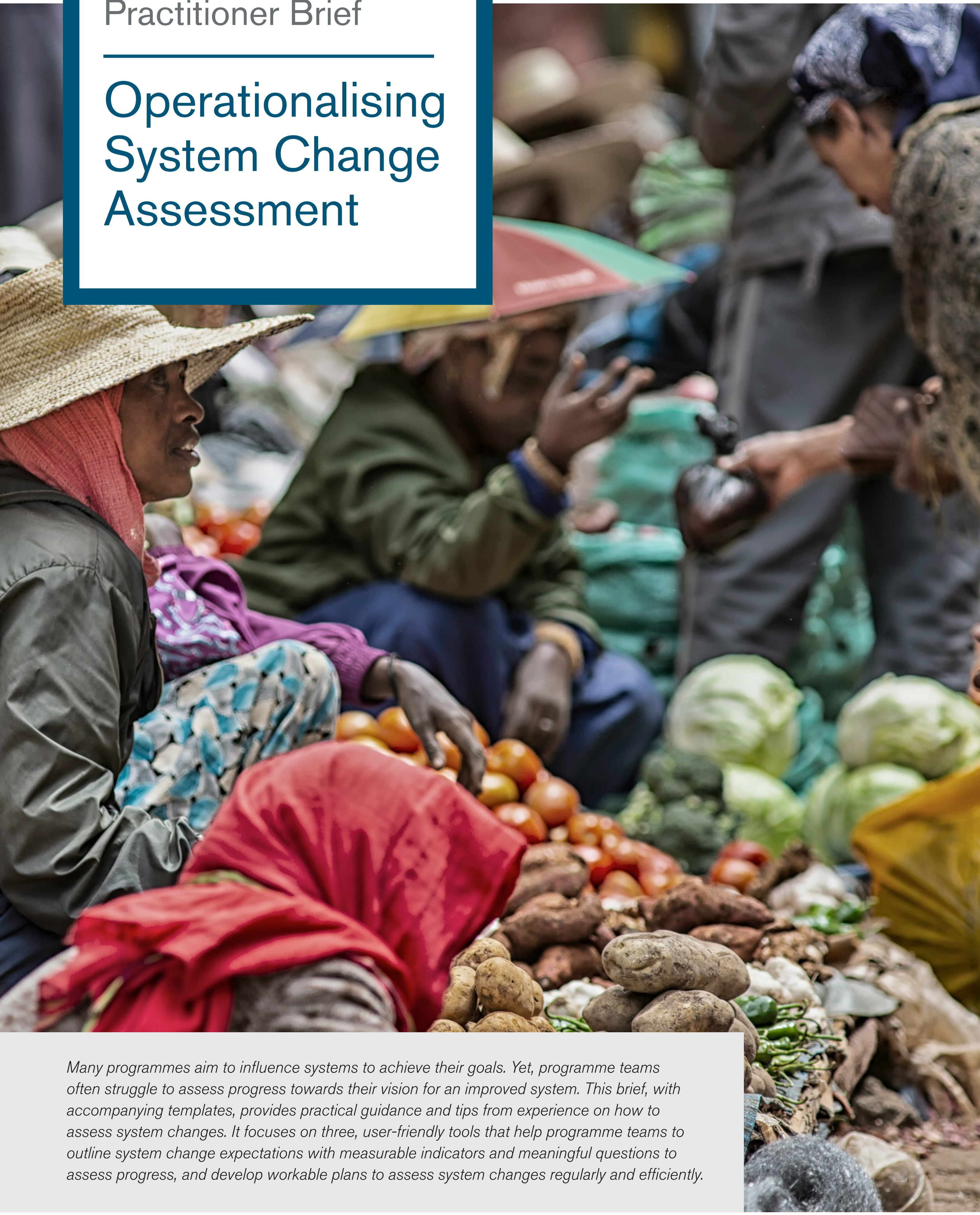
Practitioner Brief

Operationalising System Change Assessment



Many programmes aim to influence systems to achieve their goals. Yet, programme teams often struggle to assess progress towards their vision for an improved system. This brief, with accompanying templates, provides practical guidance and tips from experience on how to assess system changes. It focuses on three, user-friendly tools that help programme teams to outline system change expectations with measurable indicators and meaningful questions to assess progress, and develop workable plans to assess system changes regularly and efficiently.

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1 Introduction

The aim of many current programmes is to influence systems to achieve specific goals such as poverty reduction, green growth, environmental sustainability, resilience and inclusion. Despite this ambition, programme teams often struggle to assess progress towards their vision for an improved system that will deliver these goals. Needless to say, influencing systems is not straightforward. Without regular information on how a system is changing and how the programme is contributing to the changes, teams miss opportunities to improve strategies and adjust to new developments.

In 2020 A Pragmatic Approach to Assessing System Change was published to help practitioners clearly outline system change expectations, regularly monitor progress, and effectively use that information to improve their programmes and report to their stakeholders. It built on emerging practices and lessons from several programmes using a market systems development (MSD) approach. Since then, more programmes have used this guidance to practically assess system changes, and two training workshops with advanced practitioners have been held to further develop practice. These processes have improved our understanding of how to make assessing system changes more workable for a wider range of programmes.

This brief outlines some simplifications and shares tips that are helping more programmes assess system changes.

It focuses on simplified versions of three key tools adapted to fit with the design and results measurement systems used by many MSD programmes:

1. Strategy Table
2. Helicopter Lens Assessment Plan
3. Intervention Lens Assessment Plan

The brief is accompanied by templates with instructions and examples for each of these tools.[1] It concludes with tips for assessing system change that have been gathered from practitioners working in results measurement and evaluation.

For more information and guidance on assessing system changes, refer to A Pragmatic Approach to Assessing System Change. It addresses:

- How to set system boundaries
- How to outline a system strategy and intervention plans focused on a 'main system' and 'supporting systems'
- Why using complementary Helicopter and Intervention Lenses helps to understand system changes
- How to practically gather information on system changes using the two lenses
- How to analyse and interpret findings on system changes
- How to channel the analysis into improvements in interventions and strategies
- How to report on system changes

[1] Examples in the brief and templates are from the PRISMA programme in Indonesia. Please note that while the case is real, it has been significantly modified for learning purposes. Therefore, **the examples should not be construed as accurately depicting the context, strategy or progress of the actual programme.** Thank you to PRISMA for allowing us to use and adapt this case.

2 Outlining System Change Expectations

The Strategy Table is the starting point for assessing system changes. It is used once a programme's system boundary has been defined and a strategy developed to influence that system. The Strategy Table helps teams develop more concrete strategies with measurable indicators and milestones.

The Strategy Table uses a simple format to outline the vision for an improved system, summarise the strategy for influencing the system and identify indicators that will help the team assess the degree and type of progress based on their key questions. With this clearly outlined, the challenge of assessing system changes becomes much more manageable.

The Strategy Table focuses both on the main system that the programme aims to influence, as well as the subsystems in which it will work to influence the main system. The main system is typically defined by a product or service, a geographic focus and a target group.

Example

Main System: Maize (that is, or could be, produced and sold by smallholder farmers on Madura Island, Indonesia)

Subsystems:

- Hybrid seeds and good agricultural practices
- Off-taking and good post-harvest handling
- Financial services for agricultural production

For the main system, and each subsystem, the Strategy Table provides a structured space to:

- Summarise a timebound plan for influencing the system
- List key questions that the programme team wants to answer to understand what changes are happening, why and how
- Outline quantitative and qualitative indicators that will enable the programme team to answer the questions
- Record a starting (baseline) state and a desired state for each indicator
- Record the current state for each indicator regularly over time to track progress

Each time the programme team assesses the current state for the indicators, the new information is added to the Strategy Table either in the existing 'current' column or by adding a new 'current' column to the Strategy Table so that it shows progress over time. This approach helps the team regularly analyse progress and pinpoint challenges.

The Strategy Table provides a practical tool to generate a useful overview of system changes over time that can inform adaptations to the programme's strategy.

What has been simplified?

- The layout of the Strategy Table is more user-friendly
- An assessment plan can easily be added to the Strategy Table in a format many MSD practitioners are familiar with
- Key questions help to ensure that indicators will be useful to inform future strategy
- The Strategy Table can be used throughout a programme to track changes in the indicators, providing a practical input into review meetings to discuss progress and strategy adjustments

The accompanying excel file provides a template for the Strategy Table with step-by-step instructions on its use. It includes an example of a completed Strategy Table.

Tips on using the Strategy Table

- Consider the whole system you aim to influence, not only the expected direct results of your interventions. Ensure this is reflected in the strategy summary, questions and indicators.
- Keep your strategy summary relatively brief with a focus on how improvements in various subsystems facilitated by your work will combine to influence the main system.
- Think carefully about the questions so that they reflect the most important things you will likely need to know to understand to what extent your strategy is working, why and how, and to pinpoint what adaptations in the strategy are needed.
- Outline a manageable set of indicators that your team can realistically assess on a regular basis (as a rough guide, 5-7 for the main system and each subsystem). It is easier to start with fewer and add, rather than start with too many and get overwhelmed.
- Include both quantitative and qualitative indicators. Quantitative indicators show the extent of change. Qualitative indicators explain why and how changes are occurring.
- For the starting states and expected desired states, rough estimates are often sufficient to understand the nature of the change expected and to guide programme decision-making.
- When estimating the desired states, consider indirect results of your interventions, such as crowding-in and copying.

3 Planning System Change Assessment

The Helicopter Lens and Intervention Lens Assessment Plans enable the programme team to look at system changes from two different perspectives. When combined, these perspectives provide a solid understanding of what is changing and why, providing information on the relative influence of the programme and other factors. This helps the team analyse new developments in the context, and the programme's contribution to system changes - then use this analysis to adapt their strategies.

3.1 Helicopter Lens

The Helicopter Lens uses a big picture, top-down perspective. It tracks changes in the system regardless of what caused them. It helps the programme team understand new developments in the context, and how the different parts of their strategy are fitting together and influencing broader changes. Previously, many MSD programmes were only able to track the influence of individual interventions or innovations, not how multiple changes in a system worked together, or not, to drive broader improvements. The Helicopter Lens addresses that challenge.

The Helicopter Lens Assessment Plan is a simple tool, modelled on the results measurement plans used by many MSD programmes. It helps teams efficiently and regularly gather information on the big picture, entirely or mostly from sources they are already interacting with.

The Helicopter Lens Assessment Plan starts with the key questions that the team wants to answer to understand the extent and nature of system changes from the Strategy Table. It then includes the following columns from the Strategy Table:

- Indicators
- Starting System States
- Desired System States

Under *Indicators* the team may want to add a few qualitative questions that will help to understand why changes in the main system and supporting systems are happening. Including these questions in the Helicopter Lens Assessment Plan helps to ensure that the team gets sufficient information on both what is changing and why.

The Helicopter Lens Assessment Plan adds the following columns to the Strategy Table to outline the plan to get information on the indicators and qualitative questions:

- Indicator definitions
- Sources of information
- How information will be gathered
- When/how often information will be gathered
- Who will gather the information

The programme team develops the Helicopter Lens Assessment Plan by filling in the columns for each of the indicators and questions.

A template for the Helicopter Lens Assessment Plan is provided in the accompanying excel file, together with instructions and a complete example.

A couple of example rows are provided below using the maize example from the section above. They exclude the starting and desired system states columns due to space constraints.

Example

Indicator	Definition	Source	How	When/ how often	By whom
Average maize productivity in the last year	Average yields of maize in metric tonnes per hectare per annum	District Ag Offices Collectors in Madura	Agreement with District Ag Offices to share data Interview biggest 2 collectors in each district by phone to triangulate government data	Annually, 1 month after harvest	Implementation staff
What is driving any changes in maize productivity?		Collectors in Madura	Interview biggest 2 collectors in each district by phone Triangulate with data on changes in hybrid seed sales		

What has been simplified?

The Helicopter Lens Assessment Plan:

- Can be added to the Strategy Table, focusing on the key system elements identified by the team
- Uses a table format common in MSD programmes
- Is more easily translated into an operational plan for gathering information

Tips on developing the Helicopter Lens Assessment Plan

- Where possible, use sources that you will be gathering information from as part of your intervention monitoring.
- Make the plan efficient: where possible, use the same sources and timing for information on various indicators/questions. This can be shown by merging cells in the table, as demonstrated in the example above.
- Market actors that interact with many others, such as big traders or association chairs, can often provide useful information on big picture changes.
- Include plans to triangulate information. It's typically easier and more accurate to get evidence of change from several sources, rather than exact information from only one source.
- Be creative with sources and ways to gather information. Avoid large-scale in-person surveys. Use statistics, key informants, social media etc. - and gather information by phone, text or online when possible.
- Plan timely collection of information so that you can use it to regularly revise the system strategy.
- Keep it lean and doable!

3.2 Intervention Lens

The Intervention Lens Assessment Plan uses a bottom-up perspective focused on individual innovations or interventions. It traces the influence an intervention, or group of related interventions, has on a system by assessing how direct results influence similar or complementary indirect results. Many MSD programmes already use this lens. The Intervention Lens Assessment Plan can be added onto the plan for assessing the direct results of an intervention using the same format most commonly employed by MSD programmes today.

An Intervention Lens Assessment Plan is developed for each intervention or group of related interventions in a sector. It starts with the programme team developing a list of potential system changes that the intervention might influence.

Example

An intervention to partner with a maize off-taker to purchase hybrid maize from Madura farmers and provide them with advice on good post-harvest handling practices could potentially cause the following indirect results:

- Other farmers copy good post-harvest handling practices from those the off-taker had advised
- Expansion of the area that the partner off-taker is sourcing from in Madura
- Other off-takers start to source hybrid maize from Madura
- A local bank collaborates with the off-taker to provide finance to farmers

More examples are provided in the accompanying excel file.

The programme team then develops indicators to assess to what extent and why these changes are happening. The indicators are put in a column and the team then develops the plan to assess them. The Intervention Lens Assessment Plan is structured in the same way as the Helicopter Lens Assessment Plan. For each indicator, it includes:

- A definition (when needed)
- Source of information
- How the information will be gathered
- When/how often the information will be gathered
- Who will gather the information

By adding the Intervention Lens Assessment Plan to the programme's plans for assessing direct results, the team is more likely to gather the information when it is monitoring and evaluating the intervention, increasing efficiency.

The accompanying excel file includes a template for an Intervention Lens Assessment Plan with instructions, as well as an example from the maize case.

What has been simplified?

The Intervention Lens Assessment Plan:

- Can be added onto the plan for assessing the direct results of an intervention
- Uses a format common in MSD programmes
- Is more easily translated into an operational plan for gathering information

Tips on developing the Intervention Lens Assessment Plan

- There is typically some overlap between direct results and indirect results of interventions; it is more important to gather the information than worry about whether it should be classified as direct or indirect.
- Never-the-less, system changes assessed using an Intervention Lens typically include those that the programme did not facilitate directly but were influenced by the programme's activities with one or more partners.
- Developing the details of the Intervention Lens Assessment Plan can be delayed until there are anecdotal signs from intervention monitoring that system changes are starting to happen. To detect early signs of system changes, ask partners and directly engaged target group members about the reactions from others regarding the improvements they have implemented.
- Don't start systematically assessing the system change indicators until there are anecdotal signs from intervention monitoring that system changes are starting to happen.
- Take an "investigative" approach, tracing influence from one market actor to another.
- Focus on how the results of the programme activities with partners influenced system changes and what other factors contributed, rather than trying to attribute the system changes solely to the programme.

4 Tips for Gathering Information

The Helicopter Lens and Intervention Lens Assessment Plans provide guidance to the programme team on gathering information on system changes. Below are some tips to improve information gathering.

Make a simple research plan before gathering information

The research plan combines gathering information for the Helicopter Lens and the Intervention Lens. It can also include collecting data on direct results, making the process efficient and manageable.

The research plan can include, for example:

- A simple statement on the purpose of the research
- How the programme's contribution to observed changes will be assessed (typically by triangulating findings on changes and reasons for the changes between the Helicopter and Intervention Lenses)
- A data collection plan (more on this below)
- Ethical considerations (if there are any specific ones outside the programme's general ethics in research practices)
- Timing and resources (people, travel, etc.)

The data collection plan is derived from the assessment plans. It is organised by source of information rather than by indicator, so that the team knows all the information to collect simultaneously from each source. It covers the indicators and questions that will be investigated from each information source; how the information will be collected; and the sample. An example row from the maize case is provided below.

Example

Source	Indicators/Questions	How	Sample
When: Annually, 1 month after harvest			
Collectors in Madura	▪ Volume of hybrid maize produced in Madura in the last year (estimated, how much are they sourcing) ▪ Average maize productivity in the last year ▪ What is driving changes in maize productivity? ▪ Price of hybrid maize, price of local maize (farmer to collector) this year ▪ # of smallholder farmers with at least 50% of their land dedicated to commercial production currently (estimated proportion) ▪ Farmers' current perceptions of maize crop ▪ Farmers' current perceptions of the mainland hybrid maize market	Interview collectors by phone	2 biggest collectors in each district (total 8 collectors)

Keep sampling manageable

The aim of the research is to understand system changes, not precisely quantify them. The findings should convince a reasonable sceptic, not an academic. Emphasise triangulation among different types of sources rather than large sample sizes.

Collect information for both Lenses from the same market actors

When you collect information for the Helicopter Lens and the Intervention Lens from the same market actor simultaneously, the main difference lies in the way you ask the questions. Start with the Helicopter Lens. Ask what has changed in the sector and then why these changes are happening, without referencing the programme strategy or interventions. Then move on to the Intervention Lens. Ask if the respondent is aware of specific changes directly facilitated by the programme. Then follow up with questions about their and/or others' reactions to those changes.

Example

Below are examples of questions using each Lens for an interview with a large maize collector who did not partner with the programme.

Helicopter Lens:

- Start general: what has changed in the last year in the maize sector in Madura? Why?
- Then zero in on specific required information, for example: are farmers' maize yields changing? If so, why?

Intervention Lens:

- Are you aware that some collectors are now providing advice to farmers on good post-harvesting handling practices?
- Have you made any changes in the advice you provide to farmers? If so, where did you get the information? Why did you make the change?
- Do you know any other collectors who are providing advice to farmers on post-harvest handling practices? If so, how long have they been providing this advice to farmers? Why did they start providing this advice to farmers?

Supplement formal information gathering with informal chats and observation

Not all information gathering must be formal. Supplement it with informal chats and observations when the team members are in the field. This is a great way to spot early signs of system changes, as well as unexpected changes that might signal new opportunities, new constraints or unintended negative or positive results. Ensure that team members share anything remarkable they find, including a couple of sentences about it in the summary of findings for the next strategy review meeting.

For guidance on how to use the information gathered to inform improvements in strategy, see Conducting Sector Strategy Review Meetings (Wanitphon, 2024).