

THEORY OF CHANGE

A Theory of Change approach to planning and evaluation is increasingly being considered essential practice within social development. Theories of Change can be developed in many ways. Common elements include an articulation of how change happens in a particular context, clarification of an organisation's role in contributing to change, and the definition and testing of critical assumptions.

The term *'Theory of Change'* first emerged in the 1990s. Its purpose at that time was to address some of the problems evaluators faced when trying to assess the impact of complex social development programmes. These included poorly articulated assumptions, a lack of clarity about how change processes unfolded, and insufficient attention being given to the sequence of changes necessary for long-term goals to be reached (O'Flynn 2012). Theory of Change thinking has progressed rapidly since then, and is becoming increasingly popular.

Theory of Change can be seen as an *"on-going process of discussion-based analysis and learning that produces powerful insights to support programme design, strategy, implementation, evaluation and impact assessment, communicated through diagrams and narratives which are updated at regular intervals"* (Vogel 2012, p5). A Theory of Change can also be seen as a product, and is often presented as a mixture of diagram and narrative summary.

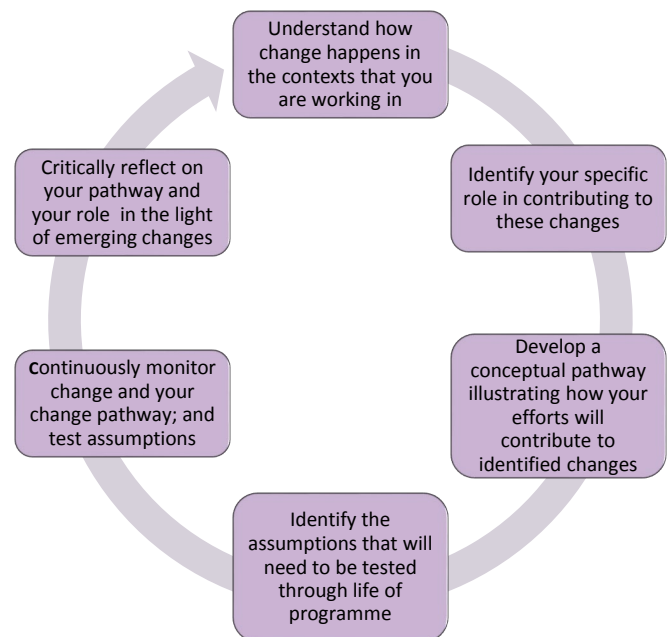
Theories of Change may be set at organisational, programme or sometimes project levels. They can be developed and used in many ways for different purposes. However, they are perhaps most useful for complex organisations and programmes involving multiple partners, as they enable a shared understanding of how change happens and an organisation or programme's own role in bringing about change (see James 2011).

Elements of a Theory of Change

Theories of Change may differ greatly between different organisations, both in the process of developing them and the look of the final product. However, there are some elements that are common to many theories of change (see diagram opposite and sections below).

Identifying how change happens: Developing a Theory of Change normally involves carrying out some analysis of the forces which have the potential to affect any desired outcomes (Jones 2010). The first step, therefore, is normally an assessment of how change could happen in relation to a particular issue. This can include an assessment of:

- which factors in the external context might help or hinder change;



- who has the power to influence change, positively or negatively;
- what or who needs to change, and at which levels (e.g. national, regional, community); and
- over what timeframes.

The assessment may be based on common understandings of how change happens amongst the different stakeholders developing the Theory of Change. In some circumstances research might be commissioned to generate additional insights and conclusions about how change happens in a particular context. Methodologies such as power analysis, stakeholder analysis or gender analysis might also be used. And if others have conducted similar assessments in the past then their findings can be used to arrive at a consensus.

Identifying your own role: Whilst the analysis of how change happens does not usually address an organisation's own intervention, the next stage attempts to explicitly identify an organisation or programme's own contribution to change. The main purpose of this stage is to be able to identify which changes an organisation and its partners can contribute to directly and/or indirectly, and which areas of change are beyond their scope.

Developing a conceptual pathway: Once there is clarity about the potential roles that an organisation (or group of organisations) can play, the next stage involves identifying an achievable long-term goal, clarifying and identifying the key changes which need to be in place for this goal to be realised, and then discussing and agreeing for an organisation or programme:

- who it needs to work with and how;
- what changes in their knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviour are required; and
- what activities or working approaches are needed to contribute to those desired changes.

The results of these discussions are often presented as a conceptual map which illustrates the linkages between an organisation's work and the desired medium and long-term changes it seeks to influence. This can be done in different ways, but at present three types of conceptual process are most often used (Jones 2010).

1. The most well-known conceptual pathway is the **causal chain**. It describes a succession of elements – inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, impacts – with different elements in combination leading to the next element. Objectives trees and impact pathways are both types of causal chains. Causal chains can range from simple logic models, such as the ones contained in a logical framework, to much more complex flow charts and diagrams with arrows pointing in all directions.
2. **Dimensions of change** can also be used. This involves developing areas or domains of change that in combination are considered important in contributing to the desired goals. Dimensions of change are most likely to be used within broad, organisational Theories of Change that are meant to be applied in different contexts at different times.
3. Some conceptual pathways are designed to capture **behavioural change** of different actors, based on the idea that actors and agency are a key driving force for change. The most common method for applying this at the moment is Outcome Mapping, which helps organisations define desired changes in actors' behaviour at different levels – changes that a programme *expects* to see over its lifetime; changes it would *like* to see; and changes it would *love* to see and that would indicate long-term sustainable change.

In each case, the idea is to make explicit the kind of change that an organisation or programme is seeking, and how the work it carries out helps support that change at different levels. In many (not all) cases the conceptual pathway also becomes a summarising diagram that can easily communicate the Theory of Change to different stakeholders. Some people call the conceptual pathway, and the thinking behind it, a *Theory of Action*, to distinguish it clearly from the *Theory of Change*, which is more concerned with how change happens.

Identifying assumptions: A critical part of Theory of Change thinking is the articulation of assumptions. Either at this point in the process, or in parallel with earlier stages, an organisation or programme develops a series of assumptions. These assumptions are often linked to specific places in the conceptual pathway, and can be seen as conditions that are necessary for change at one level to influence change at another level.

Theory of Change thinking encourages the testing of these assumptions throughout an organisation or programme's lifetime. The combination of the conceptual pathway with its associated assumptions are what makes a Theory of Change analogous to a scientific theory – a theory that can be tested and sometimes disproved, resulting in an amendment to the theory, or sometimes its complete abandonment.

Ongoing monitoring of change: Regular monitoring of change forms an important part of Theory of Change thinking. Many organisations choose to link their monitoring and evaluation systems to their Theories of Change, either by setting indicators at each level of change on their conceptual pathway, or by attempting to assess change directly (James 2011). This enables organisations to assess where change is happening, and where it is not happening, and to track whether or not they are making progress towards their longer-term goals or impact.

Within Theory of Change thinking it is also important for organisations to look at the changes that are occurring in combination with their assumptions. This can be done by comparing assessments of change at different levels and attempting to draw conclusions about how change at one level is (or is not) influencing change at another. In particular, if change is occurring at one level but failing to translate into change at another level there is a good indication that assumptions may be false or incomplete. This might mean approving, amending or discarding assumptions.

Critically reflecting: Critical reflection is a vital part of Theory of Change thinking. Monitoring or evaluating change, and reflecting on critical assumptions, should lead an organisation or programme to question itself on a regular basis. Important questions to ask include the following.

- Is the Theory of Change still valid?
- Is the organisation / programme working with the right people in the right way?
- To what extent have anticipated changes led to changes in the lives of targeted populations?
- What is now better understood than before?
- What needs to change in the understanding of how change happens, or an organisation or programme's specific role within that?

Through this critical reflection, organisations can gradually refine their Theory of Change; better articulating how change happens and their particular role in helping bring about that change, and better appreciating the assumptions that underpin their work.

Different entry points for Theory of Change

There are different entry points for Theory of Change. It is possible to enter the Theory of Change planning and reflection cycle from any of the six steps outlined above. For example, organisations that are about to revise their organisational strategy may reflect on how change happens (step 1), before they identify and describe their particular contribution, role and added value (step 2). Alternatively, evaluators conducting a theory-based evaluation of a programme often start by working with programme staff to construct a conceptual pathway and set of assumptions for a programme after the event, especially if no Theory of Change was developed at the start.

What defines a Theory of Change approach is not when or where you enter the cycle. Rather a Theory of Change approach is defined by the consistency with which the different steps in the cycle are followed through and completed over time.

Links to planning, monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment

Theories of Change can be linked into different management processes through project and programme cycles. Whilst a Theory of Change is not a planning tool per se, it can provide essential analysis that is needed in order to develop effective plans. So, for example, a Theory of Change at organisational level might enable the development of a better strategic plan, whilst a Theory of Change at programme level might enable the development of a more robust logical framework or other type of planning document.

As described above, there may also be links between the Theory of Change and the monitoring process. Critical parts of a conceptual framework, and the linkages between change at different levels, may be continually assessed, with programme alterations made based on real-time M&E data.

However, the most significant links are with evaluation and impact assessment processes. This is because a Theory of Change often lays out the expected story in advance of the changes happening, which means that it provides an explicit framework for the assessment of long-term change. With its focus on this longer-term change, Theory of Change thinking, in conjunction with appropriate impact assessment methodologies, can help address some of the bigger questions facing organisations in international development.

- What actually changed as a result of our efforts? For whom? How significant was this?
- Did we work in the right way with the right people at the right time?
- Does our Theory of Change still hold? If not, what is wrong with it? What do we need to do differently?

Theory of Change thinking includes no specific guidelines or recommendations for data collection. But when done properly it helps lay out a framework within which planning, monitoring, evaluation, impact assessment, learning and improving can all take place more effectively. It is also important to note that many methodologies used for evaluation (e.g. process tracing, contribution analysis, realist evaluation) require Theories of Change to be developed as part of the evaluation.

This does not mean that Theory of Change thinking necessarily makes monitoring and evaluation easier. On the contrary, it sometimes makes it much more difficult. But, if done properly, it makes it more useful because it better reflects the reality of what is happening (Green 2014).

Theory of Change debates

Supporters of Theory of Change thinking see many benefits in the approach (see James 2011):

- it develops a common understanding amongst all stakeholders of what an organisation or programme is trying to change and how;
- it can strengthen the clarity, effectiveness and focus of organisations and programmes;
- it provides a framework for monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment;
- it helps improve partnership by identifying strategic partners and supporting transparent conversations around change;
- as a product, a Theory of Change can be used to communicate work clearly to others;
- it empowers people to become more active and involved in programmes; and
- by explicitly dealing with long-held assumptions, Theory of Change thinking can also support innovation and 'out of the box' thinking.

Indeed, for its supporters Theory of Change thinking presents an exciting and powerful potential for CSOs to address the uncertainties and complexities of social development in a new and radical way.

Others, however, are more cautious, and worry that Theory of Change thinking may be merely a passing fad that soon becomes a tick-boxing exercise to suit donors – '*logframes on steroids*' as Green (2014) fears. Others, e.g. Macleod (2012), point out that it is not particularly new and that there are many examples of organisations in history that have had clear and explicit ideas of how change happens and their role within that, such as the Anti-Slavery Society (formed in 1823) or more latterly the Jubilee 2000 debt campaign.

Some are also concerned that Theories of Change often involve a large amount of time and resources if they are to be done effectively, and that this might be difficult for staff who are already under extreme time pressures. Whilst not a problem if staff genuinely desire to develop Theories of Change, it becomes a problem if external organisations begin to demand Theories of Change as a condition of funding, against the wishes of those staff.

As Vogel (2012) points out, Theory of Change thinking is not a magic bullet, and is only really re-emphasising the kind of deeper analysis that the logical framework was intended to promote when it was first introduced. In some quarters, developing a logical framework has become a superficial, contractual exercise and there are fears that Theory of Change thinking could follow suit.

Theory of Change thinking requires a commitment to take a *'reflective, critical and honest approach to answer difficult questions about how our efforts might influence change, given the political realities, uncertainties and complexities that surround all development initiatives'* (ibid, p5). This requires organisations to have the willingness but also the power and opportunity to be realistic and flexible in their programming at the design stage and during implementation. Most importantly, they need to be willing and able to reflect on, and adapt, their plans in the light of new learning and insights. History suggests this is by no means a given.

Summary

INTRAC believes that, at its best, Theory of Change provides the opportunity to think more clearly and strategically about how to contribute to significant, lasting changes for

real people. It is not designed to replace results frameworks such as the logical framework, but to complement them.

Having facilitated Theory of Change processes at all levels, INTRAC provides the following tips for those organisations thinking about developing a Theory of Change.

- Ensure that there is the appetite, time, resources and, essentially, Senior Management buy-in before embarking on any Theory of Change efforts within an organisation.
- Build on what is already in place. All organisations and programmes work to implicit Theories of Change. The trick is to make these explicit and find ways to fill the gaps in the six-stage process.
- Don't skip over the 'how change happens' analysis. This understanding of the dynamics of change, and the trends, actors and factors that are opening opportunities for change, is key to an organisation deciding where and how to focus efforts to achieve real change.
- The support of an external facilitator at some point can help organisations to lift their thinking above the *'business as usual'* model.

Further reading and resources

Theory of Change is a fast-moving field at the moment, and documents can quickly become obsolete as soon as they are published. There is no one comprehensive publication on Theory of Change at the moment. Readers wishing to know more are encouraged to read the documents contained in the references below, following the links in the bibliography as required.

INTRAC currently runs a course on Theory of Change.

References

- Green, D (2013). *What is a theory of change and how do we use it?* August 2013. Oxfam (blog). <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/what-is-a-theory-of-change-and-does-it-actually-help/>
- James, C (2011). *Comic Relief and Theory of Change*. Comic Relief, June 2011.
- Jones, H (2010). *The Monitoring and Evaluation of Policy Influence, A scoping review for the Department for International Development*. ODI, July 2010.
- Macleod, R (2012). *Theory of Change: A sceptical view*. INTRAC (blog), September 2012.
- O'Flynn, M (2012). *Theory of Change: What's it all about?* ONTRAC no. 51, INTRAC, May 2012.
- Vogel, I (2012). *Review of the use of Theory of Change in International Development: Review report*. DFID, April 2012.

Author(s):

Maureen O'Flynn and Clare Moberly

Contributor(s):

Alison Napier and Nigel Simister

INTRAC is a not-for-profit organisation that builds the skills and knowledge of civil society organisations to be more effective in addressing poverty and inequality. Since 1992 INTRAC has provided specialist support in monitoring and evaluation, working with people to develop their own M&E approaches and tools, based on their needs. We encourage appropriate and practical M&E, based on understanding what works in different contexts.

M&E Training & Consultancy

INTRAC's team of M&E specialists offer consultancy and training in all aspects of M&E, from core skills development through to the design of complex M&E systems.

Email: info@intrac.org

Tel: +44 (0)1865 201851



M&E Universe

For more papers in the M&E Universe series click the home button