What is theory of change?
Theory of change (TOC) is an approach that is increasingly being used by research projects to design, plan for and evaluate the impact of their research. It maps out the expected pathways or links between a project’s activities and its intended impact, whilst taking into account different contextual factors that might influence change.

This process encourages strategic planning for research impact from the beginning of the research cycle, and ongoing reflection and critical thinking about how change happens. Anticipated pathways of change are made explicit as assumptions and tested using indicators.

ToC provides a framework to monitor whether the change are made explicit as assumptions and tested about how change happens. Anticipated pathways of impact can be monitored, and the key stakeholders are able to understand and analyse evidence.

Uses of theory of change for research projects
TOC is useful for research projects because research influences policy and practice through non-linear, iterative pathways. Thinking through how research evidence might be communicated, taken up and applied by stakeholders in different country contexts from the outset can strengthen the design of the whole research process and maximise its prospects for impact.

RESYST theory of change
RESYST is an international research consortium that aims to enhance the resilience and responsiveness of health systems to promote health and health equity and reduce poverty. The intended impact is to influence health system policy and management decisions at the international level and within member countries including South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania, Nigeria, India, Thailand and Vietnam.

This long-term goal was the starting point for developing the TOC framework – a process of mapping backwards and considering what outcomes, then outputs, then activities, are needed to reach the goal and what needs to be in place for each of these to happen.

Despite the diverse contexts, personal engagement with research users is key to explaining the RESYST TOC. It is through collaborating and building relationships with stakeholders that we can ensure that research is relevant, researchers have a reputation for credible research and have strong and trusting relationships with policymakers. These factors, when combined with capacity and willingness of policymakers to use evidence, are essential for the use of research in policy and management decisions.

Impact
Research from RESYST members contributes to policy and management changes that enhance the resilience and responsiveness of health systems in low and middle-income countries.