

UK Aid Connect: Guidance Note: Developing a Theory of Change

What is a Theory of Change?

A Theory of Change describes how change is assumed to come about through intervention in a prevailing situation. The theory is usually laid out in a diagram showing the connections between interventions and outcomes – the causal pathways or results chains. But more than this, it makes clear that these causal pathways rest on a set of assumptions. And these assumptions have varying degrees of evidence to support them. It makes all three things explicit: causal pathways, assumptions, and evidence.

The idea of a 'Theory of Change' is not new. It is regarded by many as more flexible and able to capture the more complicated and real world nature of initiatives. Therefore, it has become a popular tool for development practitioners who work in complex and changeable environments. Theory of Change encourages a more holistic understanding of a context and the role of the intervention in the context. This level of perspective often strengthens design, implementation, continuous learning and adaptation, and ability to deliver desired impacts.

Sometimes an intervention is not about change, but aims to stop or reduce a specific change, or prevent something from happening - for example, maintaining biodiversity despite pressures from agriculture and industry. In such cases the theory of change explains how pressure to change will be resisted or deflected. The intervention can be seen as changing a situation from what it otherwise would have been.

Why use a Theory of Change approach?

Creating a Theory of Change is beneficial because it:

- 1) Provides a framework to think logically** through the assumed change pathways of an intervention, or design an intervention based on the current change pathways in a certain environment.

- 2) Provides a forum for stakeholders** to express their assumptions of what changes will take place. Creation of a Theory of Change is ideally participatory, capitalising on a diverse range of knowledge, and creating shared understanding, expectations, and ownership.

3) Prompts you to **weigh the evidence** behind each assumption of change, highlighting:

- I. Evidence gaps, which can ideally be filled in design phase, or if none exists then;
- II. Areas of weak evidence that need to be monitored and maybe evaluated

4) Helps to **identify potential blockages** or risky pathways that need to be managed, the potential impact of those risks, and alternative change pathways that could act as a contingency plan.

5) Helps to **identify opportunities** - other partners/events/circumstances that contribute to an intended outcome, which could be strengthened rather than putting a new intervention in place, therefore offering better vfm.

6) Forms the **basis of a results framework**, often in the form of a logframe - helping to identify SMART outputs, outcomes, and impacts, in an open and transparent way.

How is it different from a Logframe?

The differences between the two are highlighted in the table below.

Theory of Change	Logframe
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Maps out multiple causal pathways with sight of the 'bigger picture' context ▪ Explores what is implicit - spelling out assumptions ▪ Cites the evidence (or lack of it) relating to each causal link ▪ Prompts critical reflection and re-thinking of approach ▪ Is of particular value for evaluation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Monitoring tool to measure progress against the Results Chain, comparing planned and actual results along selected causal pathways. ▪ Includes indicators, baselines, targets and sources to measure progress ▪ Outlines the assumptions and risks, which are linked to the realisation of certain causal pathways.

The Theory of Change should be used as a framework for the logframe. It is important to remember that the scope of the Theory of Change is often much greater than that of the programmatic logframe.

Developing a Theory of Change

Developing a Theory of Change should be participatory. It should be designed with all those involved in making the change happen. This way you can build consensus among those supporting the intervention and discuss the value of different approaches.

Generally, a Theory of Change development process is designed around a few key steps:

1. **A situation analysis - understanding the context, including but not limited to the problem**, its causes and its consequences, and using these insights to help establish the boundaries around the intervention. This helps to scope and focus the intervention (at any level, from local to global, to institutional).

Decision Point: Consideration of the context and scope of the proposed project will often lead to a decision on whether to develop a simple or more complex Theory of Change format and approach. This may be based on and integrate learning from recent pilots on the use of complexity thinking and adaptive programming ([R4D listing of ODI paper](#)) and will influence the approach to creation of the visual schematic described in step 2, and possibly the type of software or other tool used to create the schematic. (see options below)

2. **Laying out the sequence of expected results chains in a schematic visual representation, called a logic model.** Using the logic model to identify a set of preconditions that together are deemed necessary and sufficient for the desired change(s) at the next level to occur. Working backwards is a good way of doing this - starting with the long-term goal or desired impact and then developing the logic model with its set of connected outcomes. The outcomes at each level together can then be seen as preconditions before change at the next level will be triggered. The logic model can reflect the fact that changes are not usually linear, feedback loops can be added where possible. Many different outcomes can be identified at different stages of an intervention, and then clustered in a series of levels that are most logical and useful.
3. **An explicit assessment of the evidence supporting these assumptions of change** (either in the visual representation or narrative). This assessment of evidence aids risk identification and mitigation activities as well as guiding M&E, research and learning activities. Where knowledge gaps exist this can be an opportunity for

innovative thinking on how these gaps might be addressed through a new approach or one that has been piloted elsewhere that may also work in the context.

4. **Thinking through, and making explicit the underlying rationale and actions (activities)**, and the level of success needed for each outcome in order to produce the final intended results and impact. Although often neglected, it is important to develop and apply this theory of action in conjunction with the theory of change. This can then be pulled together into a matrix as the basis for a delivery plan.

Detailed guidance on the development of a Theory of Change and facilitation of a development workshop can be found in the resources and links at the end of this document.

Example diagrams can be found in the annex to this guide, however the process of creating a Theory of Change should not be prescriptive so these should be used as a guide rather than a template.

Software resources with free (limited) usage include:

<https://www.lucidchart.com> – user-friendly flow-chart creation for simple designs

<https://insightmaker.com> – user-friendly for complex or systems designs

Characteristics of a good Theory of Change

A good Theory of Change will be:

Meaningful – represents action that's valued and worth doing; influences the design, management and M&E.

Plausible – makes good sense; is logical, comprehensive, clear and understandable

Feasible – it can actually be carried out; it's practical and focussed

Testable – results chains and assumptions can be verified. Evidence gaps are noted.

Quality is dependent upon the development process. This can be assured through (Vogel, 2012):

1. A group discussion and consultation process, as participatory as possible, with the involvement of stakeholders as feasible and appropriate
2. Clear grounding in the context, informed by local knowledge and stakeholder perspectives, with recognition of the political economy
3. Sufficient time to prepare and conduct an in-depth analysis, consult stakeholders as appropriate and achieve a genuinely reflective process

Key References and Resources

Funnell and Rogers (2011). *Purposeful Program Theory: effective use of theories of change and logic models.* Sue Funnell and Patricia J Rogers. Published by Jossey-Bass, Sydney, 2011. 550pp.

The Aspen Institute (2004). Andrea A Anderson, *Theory of Change as a tool for strategic planning. A report on early experiences.* For The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change, August 2004.

Comic Relief (2011). Cathy James, *Theory of Change Review.* For Comic Relief, September 2011.

Vogel/DFID (2012). Isobel Vogel, *Review of the use of 'Theory of Change' in international development.* For DFID, April 2012.

UNDP/Hivos (2011). Iñigo R Eguren, *Theory of Change. A thinking and action approach to navigate in the complexity of social change processes.* For Hivos, The Netherlands, and the UNDP Regional Centre for Latin America and the Caribbean, May 2011.

The following websites also provide concentrations of resources:

ActKnowledge/Aspen Roundtable - <http://www.theoryofchange.org/library/>

GrantCraft -

<http://www.grantcraft.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.ViewPage&pageId=1542>

Learningforsustainability.net -

<http://learningforsustainability.net/evaluation/theoryofchange.php>

Philanthropy411 blog -

<http://philanthropy411.wordpress.com/2010/03/29/theoryofchange/>