



## Stabilisation Unit

# Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) in Conflict and Stabilisation Settings: A Guidance Note





This guidance note has been produced by the Stabilisation Unit (SU). The SU is a cross-government unit providing expertise to build stability, prevent conflict and meet security challenges internationally.

**A major challenge in supporting stabilisation efforts is understanding the effect of this assistance in diminishing the drivers of conflict and promoting foundations for peace.**

This guidance note on *Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) in Conflict and Stabilisation Settings* supports such efforts. It augments the [UK Government's Approach to Stabilisation: A guide for policy makers and practitioners](#) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID) [Building Stability Framework](#) which set out what the UK seeks to achieve in conflict affected and unstable environments.

This guidance draws on established and emerging thinking from leading international commentators and academics in the fields of monitoring, evaluation and learning as well as HMG's work implementing MEL in conflict and stabilisation contexts.

See the [full list of references](#) that have informed this document.



Conflict and stabilisation settings present distinct challenges for MEL that differ from more stable development environments: they are highly politicised; they pose a high risk of violence; they are complex with high interconnectivity amongst actors; and they are often highly dynamic, evolving, and unpredictable.

The need for MEL in conflict and stabilisation settings is amplified by these challenges.

This guidance is a tool to enhance the design and implementation of MEL systems in conflict and stabilisation settings. Applying this guidance will:

- help to **generate data** contributing to the evidence base on responses to conflict;
- **support accountability;**
- **aid decision-making;**
- **promote learning.**

## This guidance will answer questions such as:

Why is MEL important in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

What are the key components of a MEL system?

How do I overcome challenges to MEL in conflict and stabilisation settings?

Where can I go for information and support on MEL systems?



**This guidance can help you if you are involved in designing, managing or implementing an intervention (a project, programme or policy) in a challenging – particularly conflict-affected – environment that supports efforts towards stabilising tensions and building a more sustainable peace.**

Given the SU mandate to support Her Majesty’s Government (HMG), the guidance is tailored to the specificities of that support. However, the principles and approaches outlined are also applicable beyond an HMG audience.



**For strategic stakeholders**



**For operational stakeholders**

This guidance is aimed primarily at operational stakeholders, but we have flagged the sections that are also relevant to strategic stakeholders using the icon below:





**This guidance can help you if you are involved in designing, managing or implementing an intervention (a project, programme or policy) in a challenging – particularly conflict-affected – environment that supports efforts towards stabilising tensions and building a more sustainable peace.**

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For **strategic stakeholders** (Directors or Head of Mission etc.) this guidance outlines the **essential features** of a MEL system, explains **why MEL is important** in a conflict or stabilisation setting, and **how MEL can support** you to understand and maximise your impact.

This will help you to promote strong MEL practice in your area of responsibility, communicate MEL requirements and dedicate the necessary resources to it.



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**For operational stakeholders** (those engaged in policy, programming or strategy development and delivery) this guidance provides an **introductory discussion to each of the MEL components**, together with **tips and tools to help you apply** the concepts in practice.



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For strategic stakeholders



Click on the tabs below to find out how to use this guidance

**Format**

**Navigation**

**Terminology**

**Disclaimer**



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Throughout this guidance, **key terminology is highlighted and defined**. **Text boxes provide examples** that illustrate the concepts discussed. **'Top tips'** and [links to practical tools and further reading](#) support you in operationalising the guidance.

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## Disclaimer

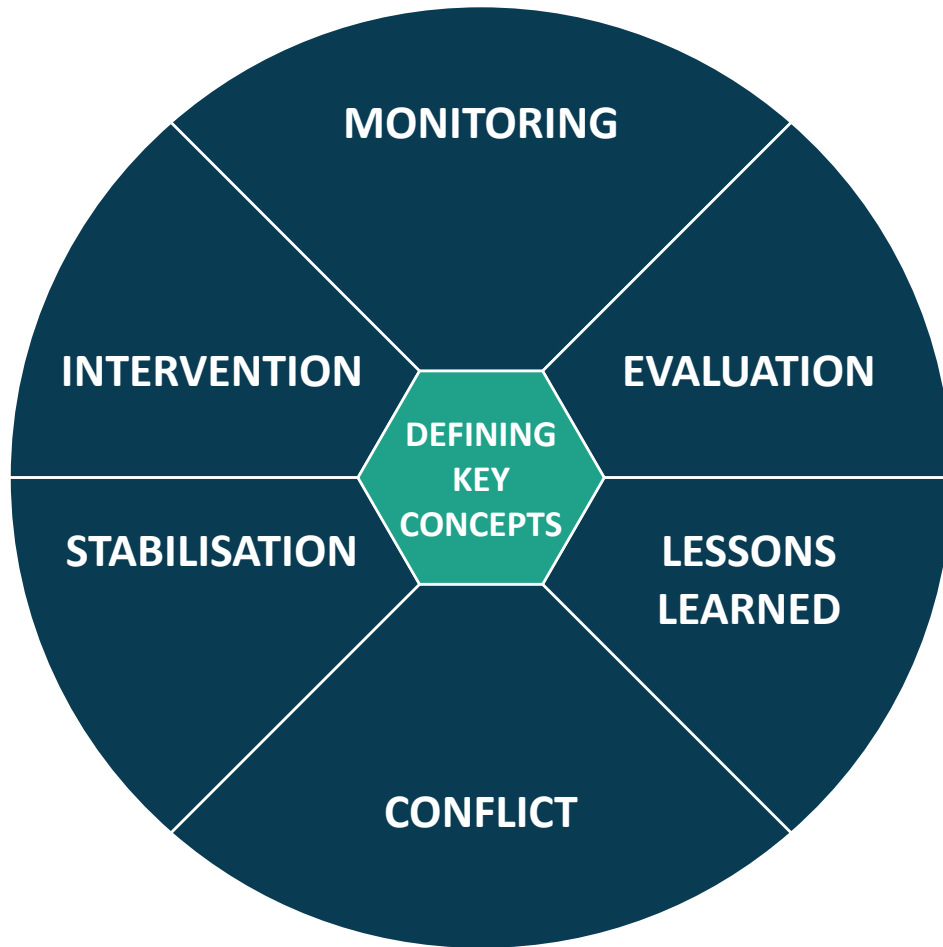
**This guidance does not have all the answers.** Conflict affected contexts are very different. MEL must be tailored to the specific context. **This guidance will provide an overview of good and emerging practice** to help you frame challenges and find solutions.



## MEL in conflict and stabilisation settings

This section:

- introduces the concepts of monitoring, evaluation and learning;
- discusses the challenges of MEL in conflict and stabilisation settings;
- outlines five core principles for effective MEL in challenging environments.

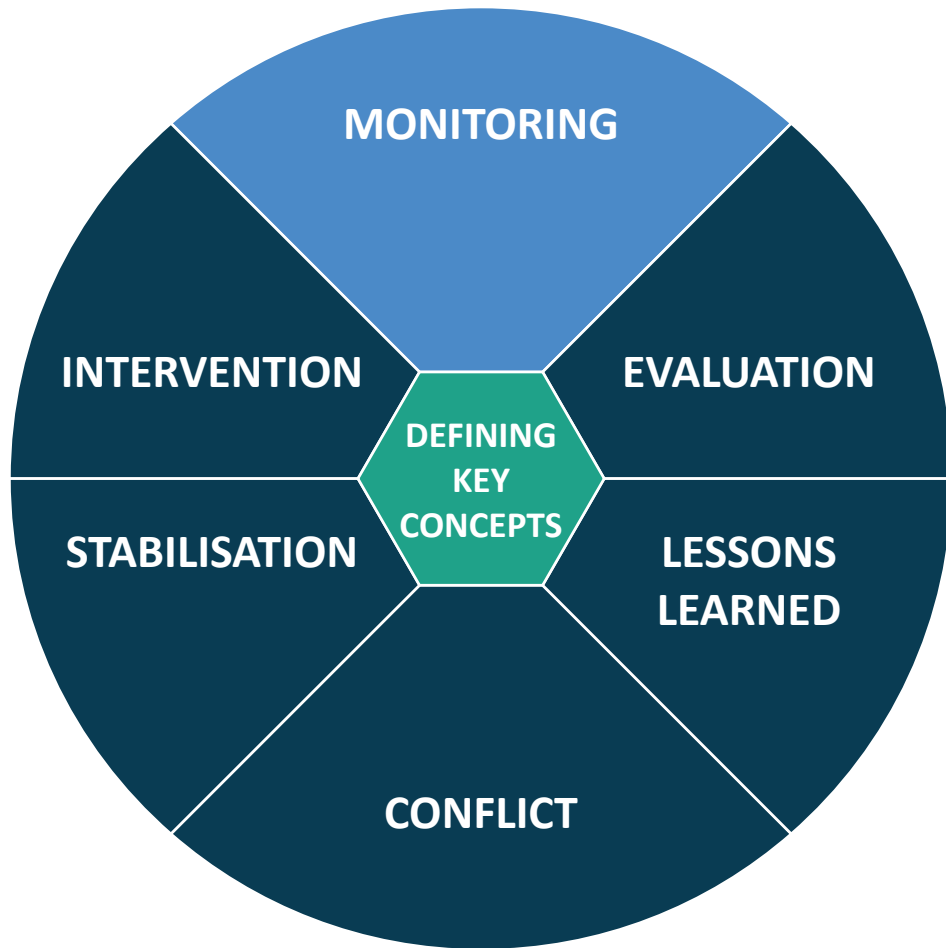


Monitoring, evaluation and learning supports effective policy and programme interventions in conflict and stabilisation settings by:

- ensuring **accountability**;
- helping us to understand **impact**;
- supporting **learning**.

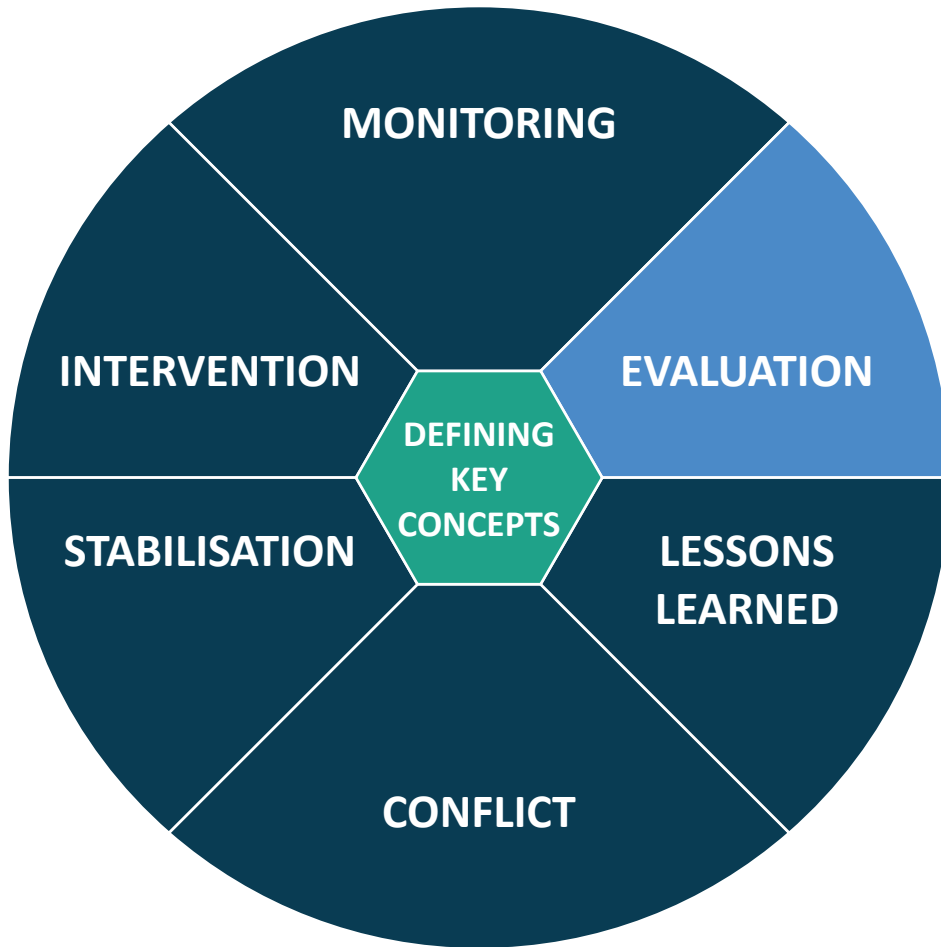
For clarity, working definitions of the key concepts of MEL in conflict and stabilisation settings are provided in this section.

 Click on the diagram sections on the left or scroll down to see the definitions of the key concepts



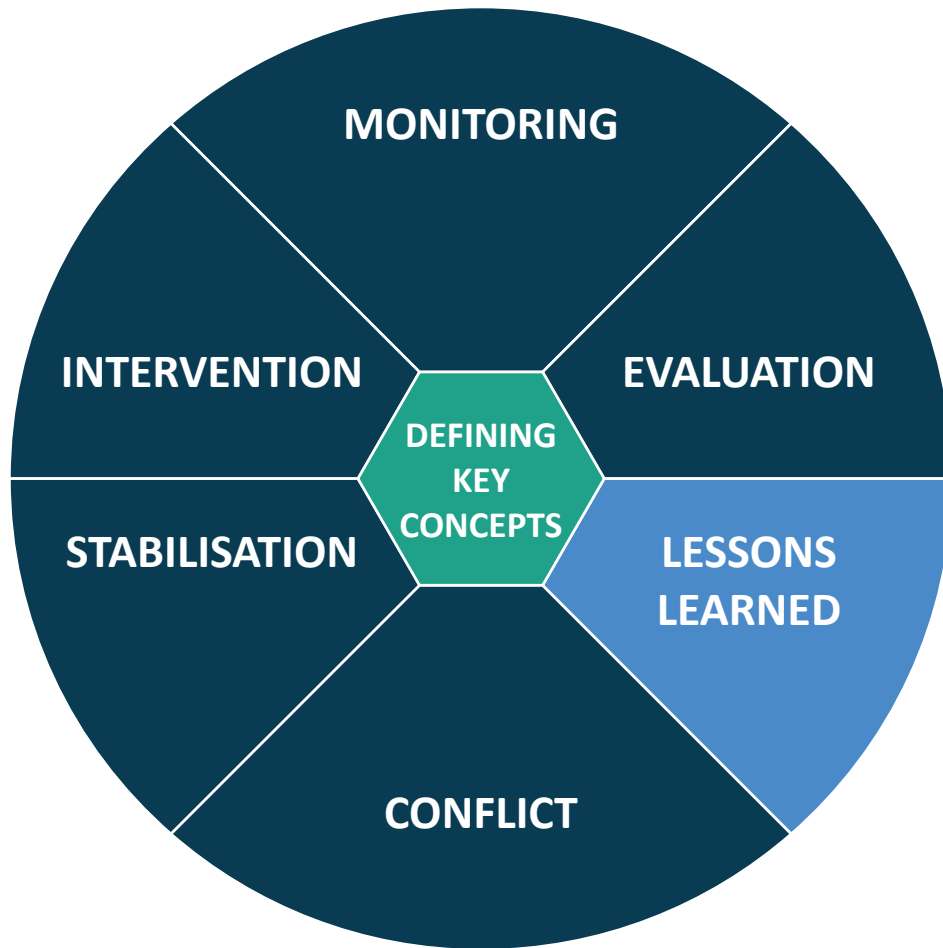
**MONITORING** is a continuous function that uses systematic collection and analysis of data on specified indicators to provide management, and the main stakeholders of an ongoing intervention, with information on extent of progress and to support decision-making.

Source: Adapted from OECD (2002)



**EVALUATION** is the systematic and objective assessment of an on-going or completed project, programme or policy, its design, implementation and results. The aim is to determine relevance and fulfilment of objectives... efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability.

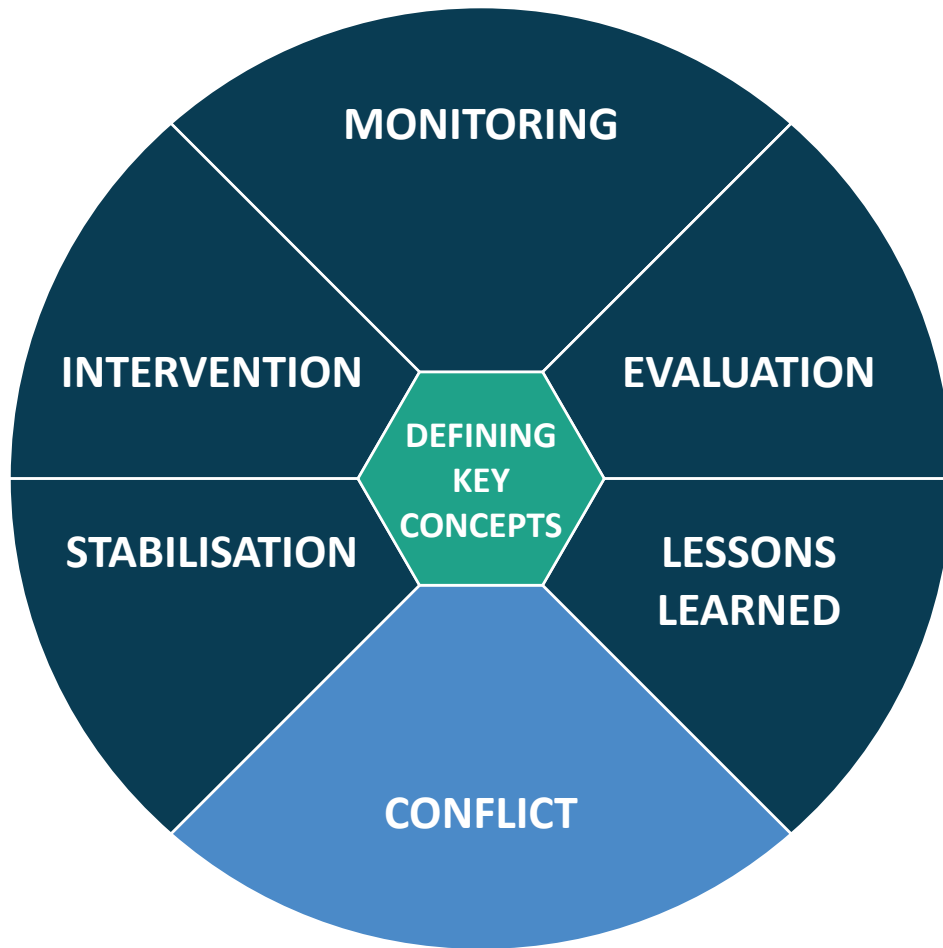
Source: OECD (2002)



**LESSONS LEARNED** are generalisations based on evaluation experiences that abstract from the specific circumstances to broader situations. Frequently, lessons highlight strengths or weaknesses in preparation, design, and implementation that affect an intervention’s performance, outcome, and impact.

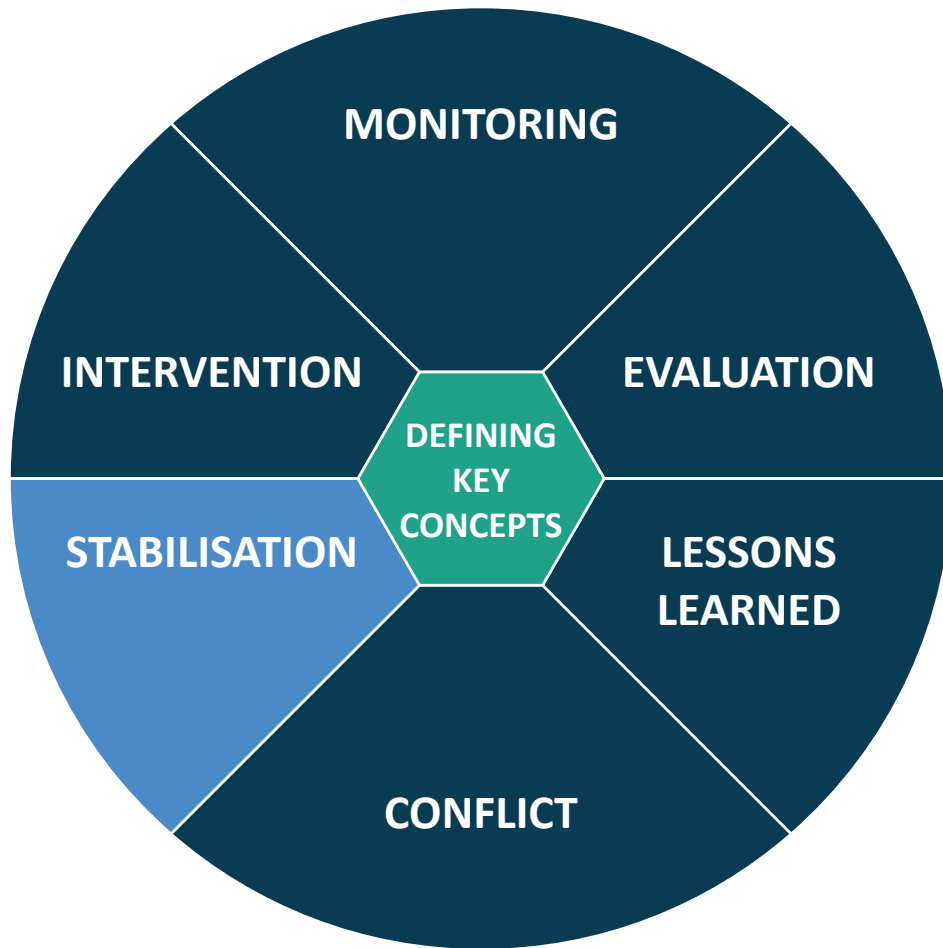
Source: OECD (2002)





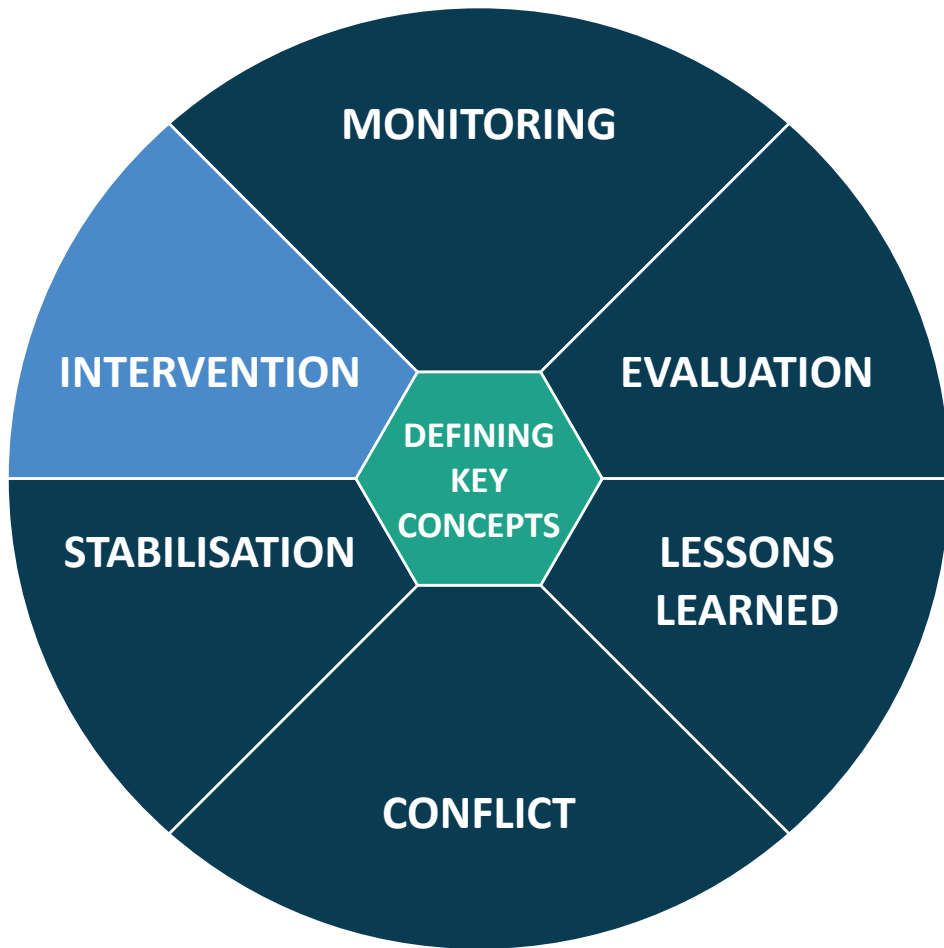
**CONFLICT** occurs 'whenever two or more individuals or groups perceive their interests as mutually incompatible and act on the basis of this perception. Conflicts can be waged violently...or non-violently.... *Deadly conflict* [is] large-scale organised violence carried out by governments or nonstate actors'.

Source: Levinger (2013)



**STABILISATION** is an activity undertaken as an initial response to violence or the immediate threat of violence. Stabilisation supports local and regional partners in conflict-affected countries to reduce violence, ensure basic security and facilitate peaceful political deal-making, all of which should aim to provide a foundation for building long-term stability.

Source: Stabilisation Unit (2019)



For the purpose of this guidance, an **INTERVENTION** may be a project, programme, policy or strategy.



CONCEPTUAL  
CHALLENGES

SECURITY  
CHALLENGES

POLITICAL  
CHALLENGES

Interventions in conflict and stabilisation settings face different, or exacerbated, challenges to those in more traditional development settings.

MEL systems often fail to address these challenges. This is a key reason why interventions continue to fall short of credibly understanding and demonstrating their results.

There are three categories of challenges to effective MEL in conflict and stabilisation settings.



Click on the arrow challenges above or scroll down to find out more



CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGES

SECURITY CHALLENGES

POLITICAL CHALLENGES

<b>EVIDENCE</b>	Lack of robust evidence demonstrating what works in conflict and stabilisation contexts to guide intervention design.
<b>DATA</b>	Limitations in data availability and quality. This is a challenge when establishing baselines, setting and collecting data for indicators and assessing outcomes.
<b>SETTINGS</b>	Conflict and stabilisation settings are dynamic and complex with new developments constantly emerging and multiple actors present and active. This requires MEL systems that can flex and adapt.
<b>CAUSALITY</b>	It is difficult to establish <i>causality</i> between an intervention and its observable effect in complex environments. These environments do not easily support evaluation methodologies that allow strong attribution claims.



CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGES

SECURITY CHALLENGES

POLITICAL CHALLENGES

SECURITY

Security risks can prevent or restrict access.

COSTS

Additional security requirements can significantly increase the costs of MEL activities.

EFFECTS

The risk of unintended negative effects is heightened.



CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGES

SECURITY CHALLENGES

POLITICAL CHALLENGES

ACTORS

Engagement by external actors in conflict and stabilisation settings is highly politicised. Engagement is either driven by politically-rooted objectives, or taking place in a context characterised by complex political economies with fragile state-society relations.

TIMELINES

Stabilisation interventions often have short time horizons in which they are expected to yield ambitious positive results under considerable scrutiny.



**Politically aware**



**Conflict and gender sensitive**



**Resourced, realistic, appropriate and proportionate**



**Innovative, but learning from other contexts**

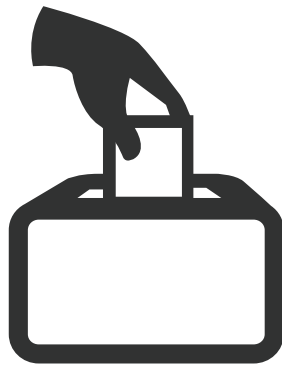


**Adaptive**





## Politically aware



Political challenges are arguably the most intractable of [the three categories](#). Time, resources, innovation and technology can overcome many of the other challenges.

Conflict and stabilisation interventions are inherently political.

To effectively support an intervention, maintain buy-in and ensure MEL outputs are useful and used, a **MEL system must be equally attuned to political priorities, incentives and realities**.

The [UK Government's Approach to Stabilisation](#) sets out broad principles (Protect, Promote, Prepare) against which intervention objectives can be set and assessed.

Political objectives must be explicit and included as a focus of MEL activity. MEL outputs must be tailored to the needs of different audiences and produced with a view to addressing their evidence needs.



Return to principles of effective MEL



## Conflict and gender sensitive



The complex and dynamic nature of conflict increases the risk of unintended negative consequences as a result of intervention. There is also a risk that the context of the conflict will negatively affect delivery.

A frank appraisal of risks, policy and programming dilemmas must be undertaken. It is imperative that every effort be taken to identify and mitigate risks through robust analysis that is regularly refreshed.

**This is as important a consideration for MEL activity as it is for the intervention that is the subject of the MEL.**



Return to principles of effective MEL



## Resourced, realistic, appropriate and proportionate



The scale and ambition of the MEL system should be:

- *appropriate* for the intervention and its context at a given time;
- *proportional* to the available capacity and resourcing; and
- appropriate to the governance requirements.

While there is no set formula, it seems wise that MEL resources be prioritised for those interventions where:

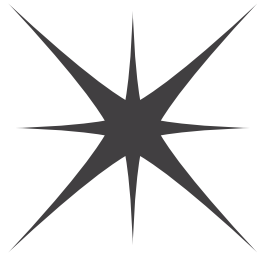
- the underpinning evidence base is weakest and there is a need to generate data for learning and adaptation;
- where inputs in terms of time and resources are higher; and
- where the risks of causing harm and/or the potential for results is greatest.



Return to principles of effective MEL



## Innovative, but learning from other contexts



Interventions in conflict and stabilisation settings face different - and in some cases unique - challenges to other settings.

While important to distinguish conflict and stabilisation settings from other more 'traditional' development contexts, much can be learned from other settings/thematic areas about what to measure and how to do it.

Examples include:

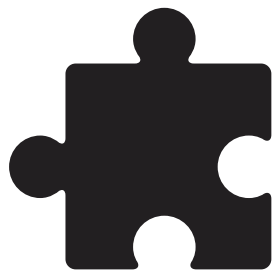
- real-time approaches used in the humanitarian space;
- work in the governance sectors to monitor and evaluate capacity development;
- institutional reform and impact on policy process.



Return to principles of effective MEL



## Adaptive



Conflict-affected environments are characterised by rapid change. Therefore, interventions must be able to adapt to retain their relevance.

Successful adaptation requires that:

- MEL activities take place in real time;
- evidence is regularly used to (re)examine the intervention logic; and
- learning is incorporated back into the intervention design or the evolution cycle.

A flexible MEL system can support an intervention to adapt and improve its performance.

Yet, being adaptive has implications for the MEL skills and resources required and the methodologies that can be used. These implications should be considered at the outset.



Return to principles of effective MEL



## Designing a MEL system

A MEL system is a collection of components related to design, monitoring, evaluation and learning that, when developed and implemented together, constitute a *system* that supports you to track implementation of your interventions and understand their effects.

[Click to view the MEL diagram](#)



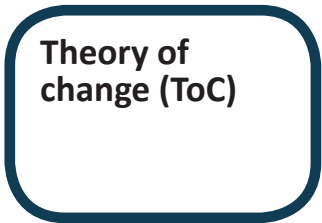
## The MEL diagram

 Click on the numbers below to build this diagram

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## The MEL diagram



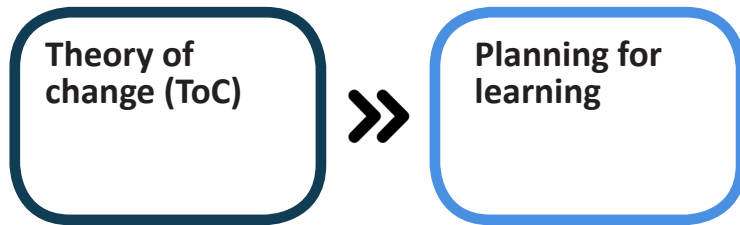
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## The MEL diagram

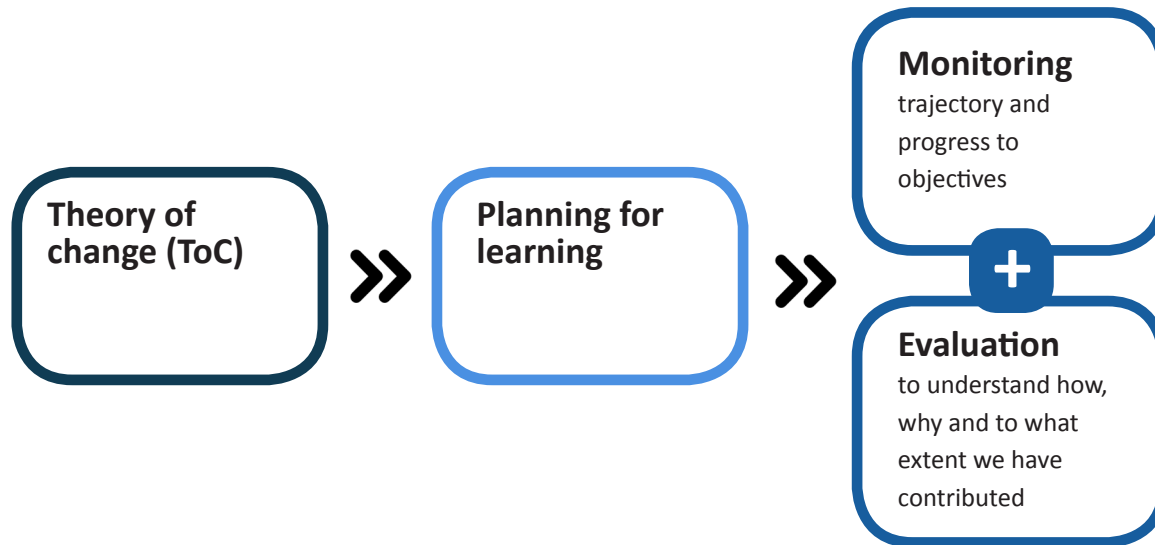


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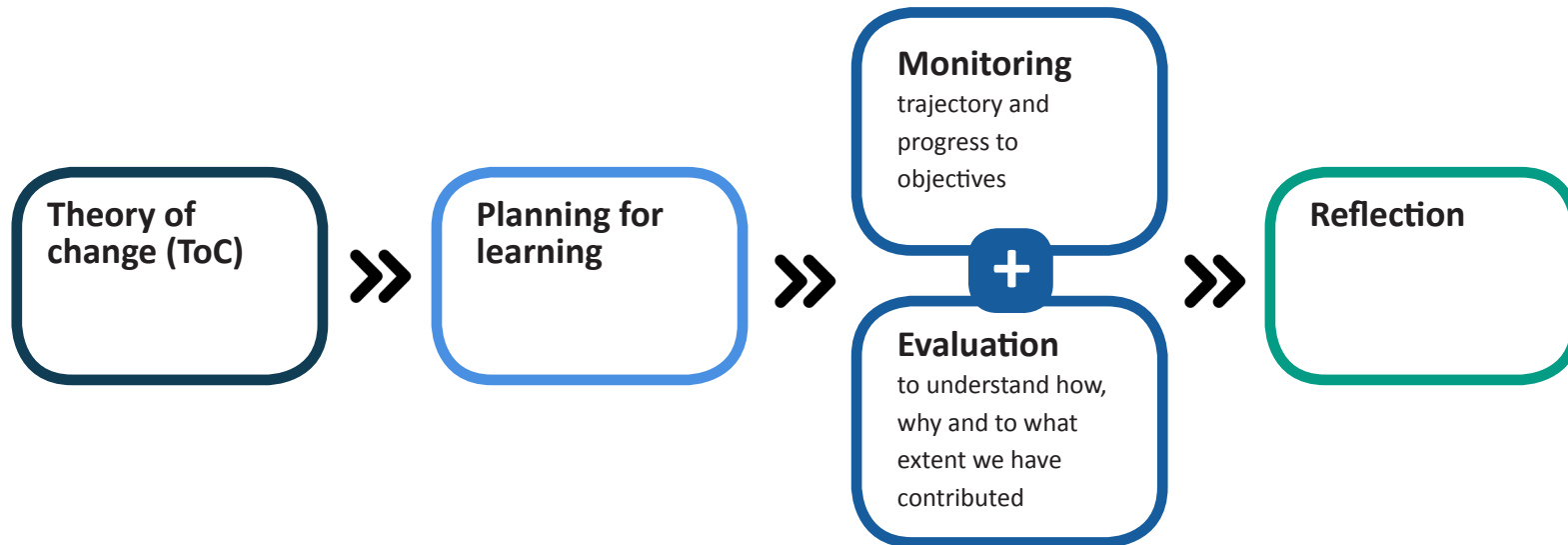


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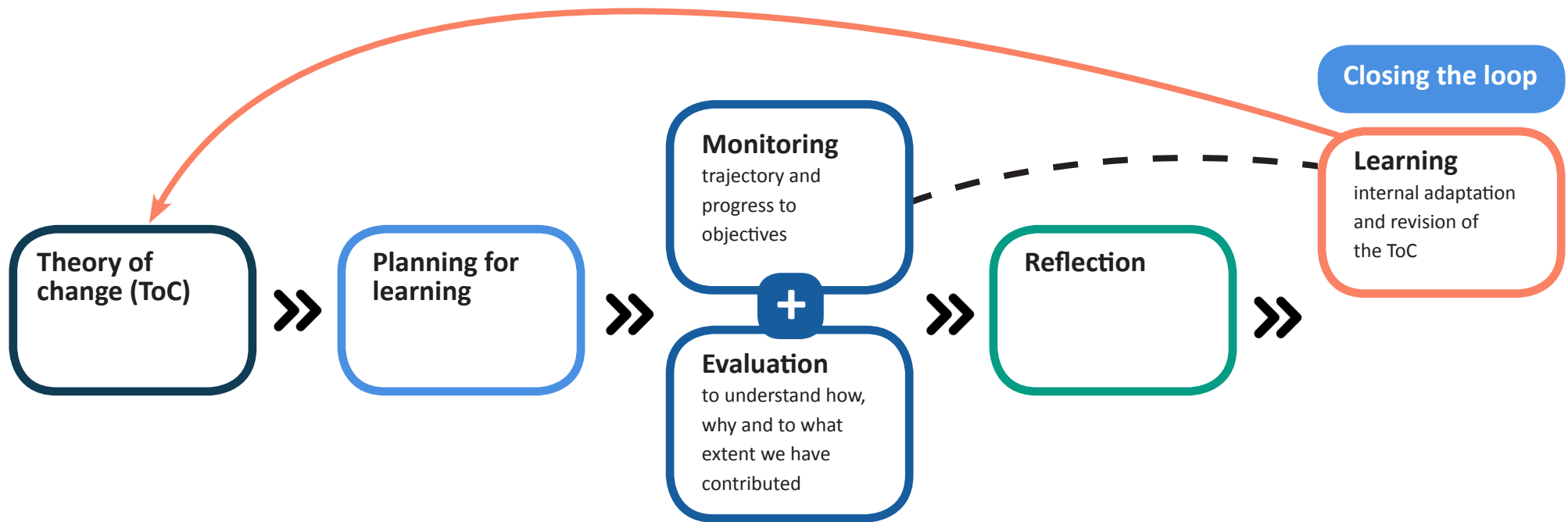


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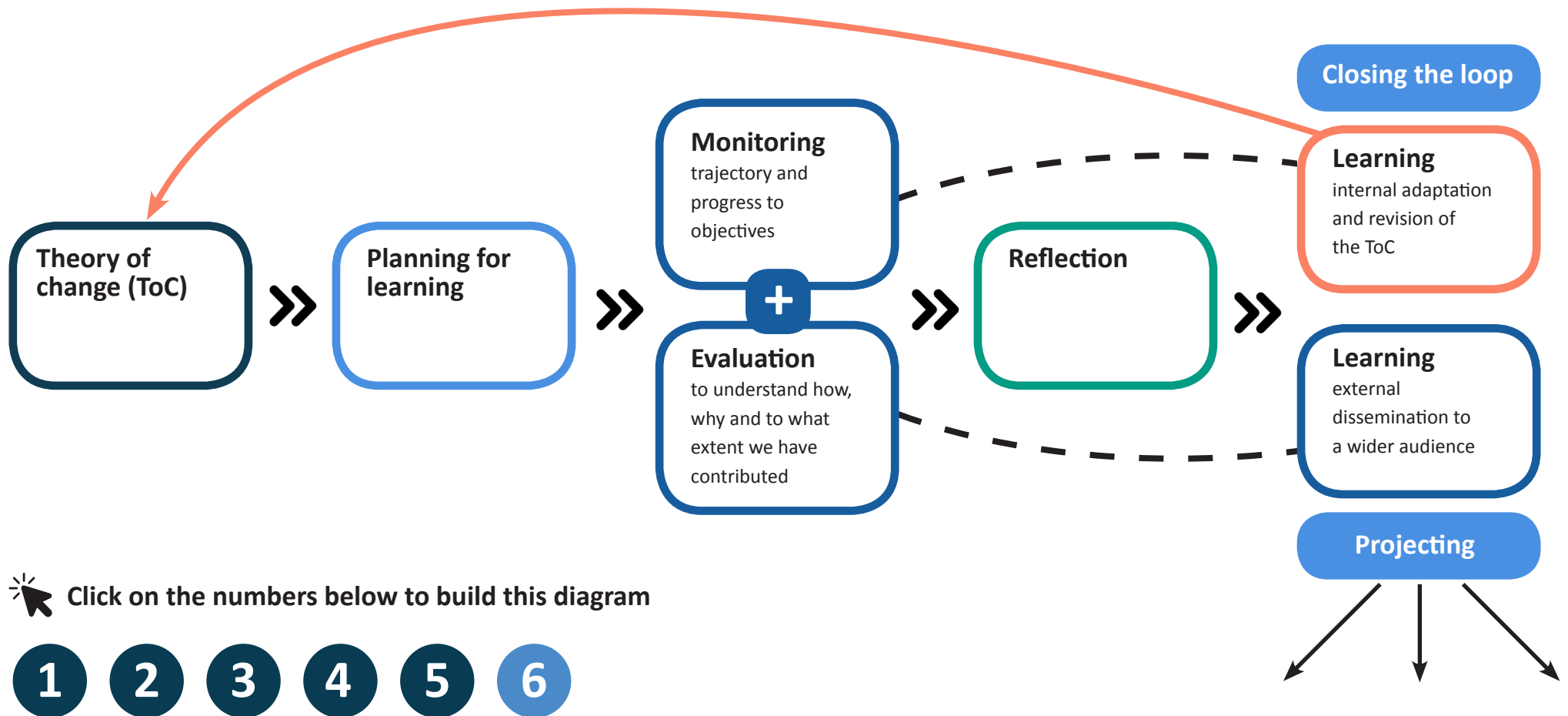


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- 4
- 5
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### The MEL diagram



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- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6



**Theory of change** | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

**THEORY OF CHANGE (ToC)** is an explicit articulation of how an intervention creates an intended result to address a specific problem.

Adapted from Wholey (1987), Rogers *et al.* (2000) and Rogers (2014)

**A ToC seeks to understand the wider context in which an intervention takes place and describe how *change* is assumed to come about as a result of intervention in that specific context.**

It articulates what an intervention is intended to do, why and how it does this and what it aims to change by doing so, taking into account the drivers and barriers to change in that context.

A ToC is often summarised as a diagram which shows the causal pathway(s), the step by step process by which change is assumed to come about and which links an intervention's activities to its intended results.

More than this, a ToC makes clear that these pathways rest on a set of **assumptions about how change might take place in this context**, and that these assumptions are supported by varying degrees of **evidence**.



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Why is a ToC useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

All interventions have underpinning theories about how they will achieve results. This is as true for interventions in conflict and stabilisation settings as any other.

Success (or failure) cannot be fully understood without an understanding of the context in which an intervention is taking place, the problem it is intended to address, the rationale for choosing a particular approach, and how it is expected to operate.

This point is demonstrated by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) in its 2018 review of the UK Conflict Security and Stability Fund (CSSF).

Box 1: Learning from the CSSF

The Fund [...] aims to address the longer-term drivers of conflict, instability and insecurity. For CSSF programming to do this it needs a clearer rationale for how it will contribute to sustainable peace, stability and security. This rationale should be set out in theories of change [...].

A theory of change must cover a coherent effort. In the case of the CSSF, this would often include one or more CSSF programmes (ODA and non-ODA), as well as diplomatic or defence engagements and possibly other UK and wider international efforts. We saw a number of theories of change that consisted only of a few bullet points [...]. Such a superficial ToC is not useful for planning, monitoring or evaluation purposes.

Source: ICAI (2018) pp. 18-19



## Clearly articulating the theory of change will:

- » help strengthen intervention design and define realistic results;
- » help ensure alignment with higher level policy or strategic objectives;
- » enable an intervention to be effectively monitored and evaluated;
- » help ensure integration and coordination with other (external) interventions;
- » provide a platform for challenge.





**Theory of change** | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

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**Step by step guide to developing a theory of change**

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

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Tips and tools

Further reading

### Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Different organisations and individuals propose different ways of approaching a theory of change.

The process outlined in this guidance provides a handrail that draws from a variety of these approaches.



**TOP TIP:** Effective learning starts during the intervention design phase. Think about MEL planning at the earliest opportunity.

[Click to view the Theory of Change process](#)



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**Step by step guide to developing a theory of change**

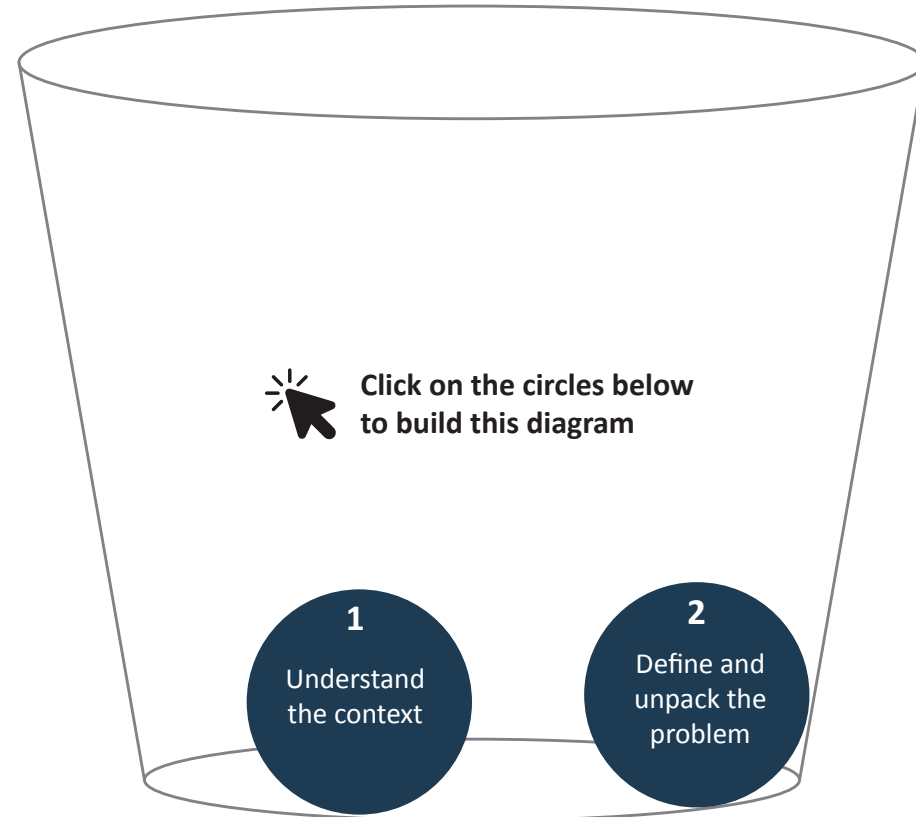
Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

## Theory of change process





Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

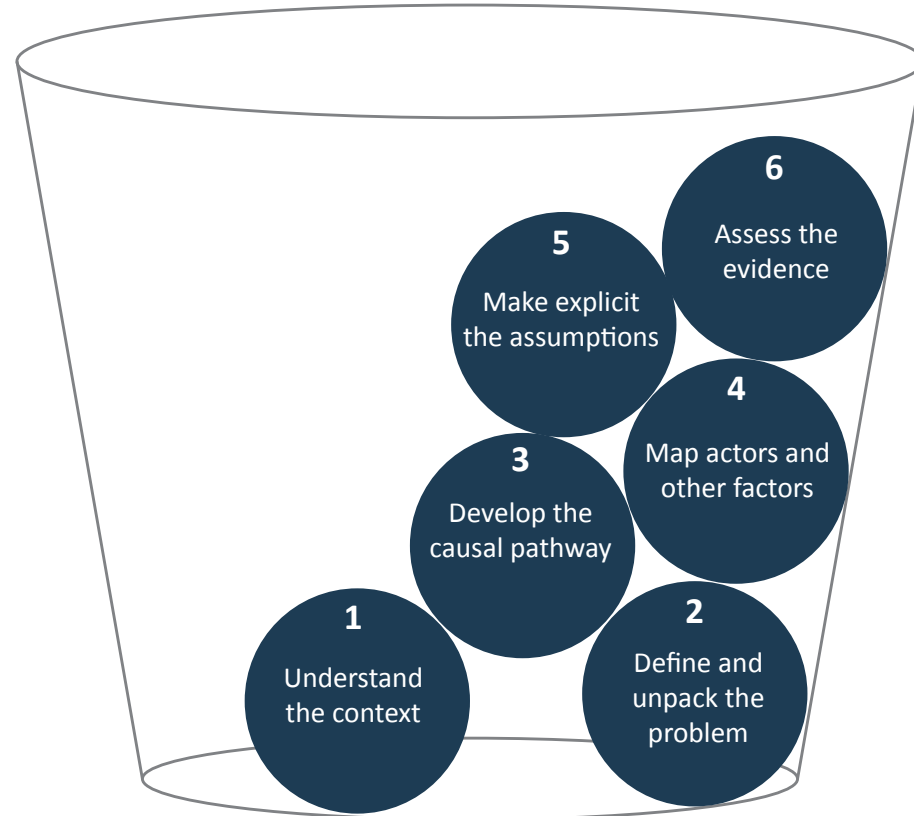
Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

### Theory of change process



**TOP TIP:** Steps 1 and 2 should always be the starting point for any theory of change process. In reality the steps that follow may not flow in neat sequential order. Rather they may happen simultaneously.





Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 1 Understand the context

Many of the challenges in conflict and stabilisation interventions stem from a lack of understanding of the context, and in turn a lack of realism about the capacity of external actors to support substantive positive change.

Understanding the context, how change happens in that context, and ensuring this is shared among staff and partners, is essential at the earliest stages of an intervention in a conflict and stabilisation setting. In these early stages there may be little pre-existing knowledge but considerable time and political pressure to act.

Carrying out robust [conflict analysis](#) and [gender analysis](#), and using this to inform intervention design and MEL strategy, will help ensure interventions are feasible, do not exacerbate conflict dynamics and inequality and that, where possible, they positively contribute to peace and stability.



**TOP TIP:** If you are in a situation with an ongoing intervention that is not grounded in an understanding of the context, or where the context has shifted, step 1 can still be completed as part of a ToC refresh. **It is never too late!**



[Theory of change](#) | [Monitoring](#) | [Evaluation](#) | [Learning](#)

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Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

[Step 1](#) > [Step 2](#) > [Step 3](#) > [Step 4](#) > [Step 5](#) > [Step 6](#)

## Theory of change process

### Step 1 Understand the context

- [Joint analysis of conflict and stability](#)
- [Gender analysis](#)

## Conflict analysis

- ⊕ What is conflict analysis?
- ⊕ Why is conflict analysis helpful?
- ⊕ How do I do a conflict analysis?
- ⊕ Where can I find support on conflict analysis?



Click on the plus icons above to expand the questions



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 1 Understand the context

**CONFLICT ANALYSIS** 'is the systematic study of the profile, causes, actors, and dynamics of conflict.'

Source: Conflict Sensitivity Consortium (2012) Ch.2, p.1

## Conflict analysis

### What is conflict analysis?

Conflict analysis is a systematic and structured approach to identifying the factors driving conflict and violence, the actors involved and their interests, and the entry points or opportunities to build a society's capacities for resolving differences without resort to violence.

Conflict analysis supports those operating in conflict affected environments to understand the context in which they are working, and their role in that context. A conflict analysis can be carried out at various levels of a conflict (regional, national or local) and typically seeks to establish linkages between these levels.



Back to the conflict analysis guidance questions



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 1 Understand the context

**CONFLICT SENSITIVITY** ‘is the ability of an organisation to understand the context it operates in; understand the interaction between its intervention and that context; and act upon this understanding to maximise positive impacts on conflict’.

Source: Conflict Sensitivity Consortium (2012) Ch.2, p.1

## Conflict analysis

### Why is conflict analysis helpful?

Without a nuanced understanding of the conflict context, an intervention cannot hope to influence positive change. Further, in the absence of contextual understanding, those implementing interventions may unintentionally fuel conflict. Therefore, conflict analysis is the basis for *conflict-sensitive interventions*.

Conflict sensitivity is acting with the understanding that any intervention conducted in a conflict-affected environment will interact with that conflict and that such interaction will have consequences that may have positive or negative effects. It is a deliberate and systematic approach to ensuring that we understand and minimise negative effects (risks) and maximise positive effects (opportunities) of our actions.



Back to the conflict analysis guidance questions



[Theory of change](#) | [Monitoring](#) | [Evaluation](#) | [Learning](#)

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[Step by step guide to developing a theory of change](#)

[Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity](#)

[Presenting the theory of change](#)

[Tips and tools](#)

[Further reading](#)

[Step 1](#) > [Step 2](#) > [Step 3](#) > [Step 4](#) > [Step 5](#) > [Step 6](#)

## Theory of change process

### Step 1 Understand the context

## Conflict analysis

### How do I do a conflict analysis?

Conflict sensitivity is relevant in situations of active violent conflict and in situations that are fragile but currently non-violent (latent conflict).

Conflict sensitivity should inform the design of new activities but can also be applied to existing interventions.

It involves four interlinked steps: **conflict analysis, conflict sensitivity review, conflict-sensitive implementation, conflict sensitivity monitoring.**



[Back to the conflict analysis guidance questions](#)





**Theory of change** | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

**Step by step guide to developing a theory of change**

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

**Step 1** > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 1 Understand the context

## Conflict analysis

### Where can I find support on conflict analysis?

Stabilisation Unit (2016) [Conflict Sensitivity: Tools and Guidance](#) .

Conflict Sensitivity Consortium - APFO, CECORE, CHA, FEWER, International Alert, Saferworld (2004) [Conflict-sensitive approaches to development, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding: A resource pack](#).

The Conflict Sensitivity Consortium (2012) [How To Guide to Conflict Sensitivity](#)

Haider, H. (2014) [Conflict Sensitivity: Topic Guide](#). GSDRC, University



Back to the conflict analysis guidance questions



[Theory of change](#) | [Monitoring](#) | [Evaluation](#) | [Learning](#)

[Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?](#)

[Step by step guide to developing a theory of change](#)

[Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity](#)

[Presenting the theory of change](#)

[Tips and tools](#)

[Further reading](#)

[Step 1](#) > [Step 2](#) > [Step 3](#) > [Step 4](#) > [Step 5](#) > [Step 6](#)

## Theory of change process

### Step 1 Understand the context

- [Conflict analysis](#)
- [Gender analysis](#)

## Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability (JACS)

- ⊕ What is a JACS?
- ⊕ Why is a JACS helpful?
- ⊕ How do I do a JACS?
- ⊕ Where can I find support on JACS?



Click on the plus icons above to expand the questions



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 1 Understand the context

## Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability (JACS)

### What is a JACS?

Conflict analysis is the first step in conflict sensitivity. It identifies the main drivers of the conflict and should recognise the UK as an actor within the conflict context. Analysis to inform strategic policy choices and country portfolios can take the form of a JACS.

JACS is an integrated cross-UK Government approach to understanding conflict and stability. It is a strategic assessment that underpins UK National Security Council Strategies. It was introduced in 2011 to strengthen cross-government approaches to tackling conflict and instability and to identify situation-specific interventions most likely to succeed (DFID, FCO and MOD, 2011, [Building Stability Overseas Strategy](#), p.24).



Back to the JACS guidance questions



[Theory of change](#) | [Monitoring](#) | [Evaluation](#) | [Learning](#)

[Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?](#)

[Step by step guide to developing a theory of change](#)

[Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity](#)

[Presenting the theory of change](#)

[Tips and tools](#)

[Further reading](#)

[Step 1](#) > [Step 2](#) > [Step 3](#) > [Step 4](#) > [Step 5](#) > [Step 6](#)

## Theory of change process

### Step 1 Understand the context

## Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability (JACS)

### Why is a JACS helpful?

The JACS process supports a shared understanding among key actors around the causes and drivers of conflict in a particular situation, as well as agreement on the key priorities for UK intervention to promote stability.

A good JACS can:

- sharpen UK policy and strategy by providing a common understanding of the context in which the UK is engaged, ensuring that the government's approach is tailored, realistic and achievable;
- provide a compelling rationale for UK engagement and decision-making, supporting prioritisation and ensuring a focus on what is most important in complex operating environments;
- underpin robust risk management and conflict sensitivity by identifying competing interests and potential harmful consequences of various courses of action.



[Back to the JACS guidance questions](#)



[Theory of change](#) | [Monitoring](#) | [Evaluation](#) | [Learning](#)

[Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?](#)

[Step by step guide to developing a theory of change](#)

[Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity](#)

[Presenting the theory of change](#)

[Tips and tools](#)

[Further reading](#)

[Step 1](#) > [Step 2](#) > [Step 3](#) > [Step 4](#) > [Step 5](#) > [Step 6](#)

## Theory of change process

### Step 1 Understand the context

## Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability (JACS)

### How do I do a JACS?

A JACS can be undertaken at all stages of a conflict. The collaborative process is as important as the formal output. The Stabilisation Unit has produced a JACS Guidance Note to take policy and programme teams step by step through the JACS process.



[Back to the JACS guidance questions](#)



**Theory of change** | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

**Step by step guide to developing a theory of change**

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

**Step 1** > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 1 Understand the context

## Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability (JACS)

### Where can I find support on JACS?

Stabilisation Unit (2017) [Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability: Guidance Note](#).

Stabilisation Unit (forthcoming) Integrating Gender into Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability.



Back to the JACS guidance questions



[Theory of change](#) | [Monitoring](#) | [Evaluation](#) | [Learning](#)

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

[Step by step guide to developing a theory of change](#)

[Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity](#)

[Presenting the theory of change](#)

[Tips and tools](#)

[Further reading](#)

[Step 1](#) > [Step 2](#) > [Step 3](#) > [Step 4](#) > [Step 5](#) > [Step 6](#)

## Theory of change process

### Step 1 Understand the context

- [Conflict analysis](#)
- [Joint analysis of conflict and stability](#)

## Gender analysis

- ⊕ What is gender analysis?
- ⊕ Why is gender analysis helpful?
- ⊕ How do I do a gender analysis?
- ⊕ Where can I find support on gender analysis?



Click on the plus icons above to expand the questions



[Theory of change](#) | [Monitoring](#) | [Evaluation](#) | [Learning](#)

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

[Step by step guide to developing a theory of change](#)

[Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity](#)

[Presenting the theory of change](#)

[Tips and tools](#)

[Further reading](#)

[Step 1](#) > [Step 2](#) > [Step 3](#) > [Step 4](#) > [Step 5](#) > [Step 6](#)

## Theory of change process

### Step 1 Understand the context

## Gender analysis

### What is gender analysis?

*Gender* refers to the socially constructed roles and relationships between men and women. Rather than being determined by biology, gender is learned; that means men and women are taught certain roles and appropriate behaviours according to their sex. Gender roles are dynamic and shift over time; they often change during periods of instability and conflict.

**Gender analysis** is the process of analysing the ways in which the experiences of women, men, girls, boys and sexual and gender minorities (SGMs) differ and applying this understanding to intervention design and delivery. Gender analysis is concerned with the underlying causes of inequality and aims to provide a foundation for positive change.



[Back to the gender analysis guidance questions](#)





Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 1 Understand the context

**GENDER SENSITIVITY** concerns how interventions consider the different experiences of women, men, girls, boys and SGMs, and act on this understanding to ensure that they do not amplify gender inequalities, and instead contribute to achieving gender equality.

## Gender analysis

### Why is gender analysis helpful?

Gender analysis aids understanding of the gendered causes and consequences of conflict, and the different needs and priorities of women, men and SGMs in a conflict context. An understanding of the gender dynamics in a specific context is critical to ensuring that an intervention is gender sensitive.

Without gender analysis to inform interventions, there is a risk of exacerbating the inequalities, injustice, discrimination and disempowerment that may have fuelled instability and violence. There is also a risk of missing opportunities to promote equitable peace.

The International Development (Gender Equality) Act 2014 stipulates that all UK development assistance must meaningfully consider how it will contribute to reducing gender inequality. For the UK Conflict, Security and Stability Fund (CSSF), this applies to both ODA and non-ODA spend. Ensuring interventions are underpinned by gender analysis is an important means to support compliance.



Back to the gender analysis guidance questions



[Theory of change](#) | [Monitoring](#) | [Evaluation](#) | [Learning](#)

[Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?](#)

[Step by step guide to developing a theory of change](#)

[Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity](#)

[Presenting the theory of change](#)

[Tips and tools](#)

[Further reading](#)

[Step 1](#) > [Step 2](#) > [Step 3](#) > [Step 4](#) > [Step 5](#) > [Step 6](#)

## Theory of change process

### Step 1 Understand the context

## Gender analysis

### How to do a gender analysis?

Gender analysis can be carried out at different levels (regional, national, local) according to its purpose:

- To inform country strategy, gender analysis will be at the national level.
- To inform the design of a specific project, more local level analysis may be needed.

The next step is to develop core analysis questions and to source, or commission, data to respond to these. Data and reports available from NGOs and donors may provide a starting point.



[Back to the gender analysis guidance questions](#)



**Theory of change** | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

**Step by step guide to developing a theory of change**

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

**Step 1** > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 1 Understand the context

## Gender analysis

Where can I find support on gender analysis?

Saferworld (2016) [Gender Analysis of Conflict Toolkit](#).

Saferworld, WILPF, Oxfam (2017) [Building Inclusive Peace: Gender at the Heart of Conflict Analysis](#).

Conciliation Resources (2015) [Gender and conflict analysis toolkit for peacebuilders](#).

Stabilisation Unit (forthcoming) Integrating Gender into Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability.



Back to the gender analysis guidance questions



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 2 Define and unpack the problem

A clear problem statement is essential for a ToC. The problem statement should be grounded in an understanding of the [context](#) from which specific aspect(s) may be identified for an intervention to address.

For HMG interventions, these aspects should relate to wider strategic policy priorities set by the National Security Council at the country level or through engagement with policy makers on the ground.

It is important to unpack the problem by considering both its **consequences** and **causes**. This will help to focus the intervention on what we want to change and help in developing an appropriate solution to the problem.



**TOP TIP:** This early step in the theory of change process is not easy, particularly when working with multiple stakeholders with different perspectives. monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practitioners can support you to work through this process.

Click to view the Problem Analysis diagram



**Theory of change** | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

**Step by step guide to developing a theory of change**

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > **Step 2** > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 2 Define and unpack the problem

## Problem analysis diagram

 Click on the numbers to build this diagram

- 1**
- 2**
- 3**
- 4**
- 5**

Adapted from Government Partnerships International (2019)



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 2 Define and unpack the problem

## Problem analysis diagram



 Click on the numbers to build this diagram

- 1**
- 2**
- 3**
- 4**
- 5**

Adapted from Government Partnerships International (2019)



**Theory of change** | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

**Step by step guide to developing a theory of change**

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

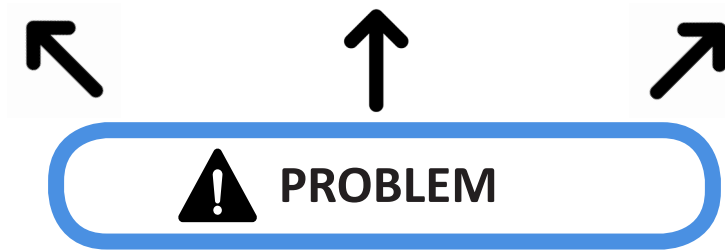
Further reading

Step 1 > **Step 2** > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 2 Define and unpack the problem

## Problem analysis diagram



 Click on the numbers to build this diagram

- 1**
- 2**
- 3**
- 4**
- 5**

Adapted from Government Partnerships International (2019)



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

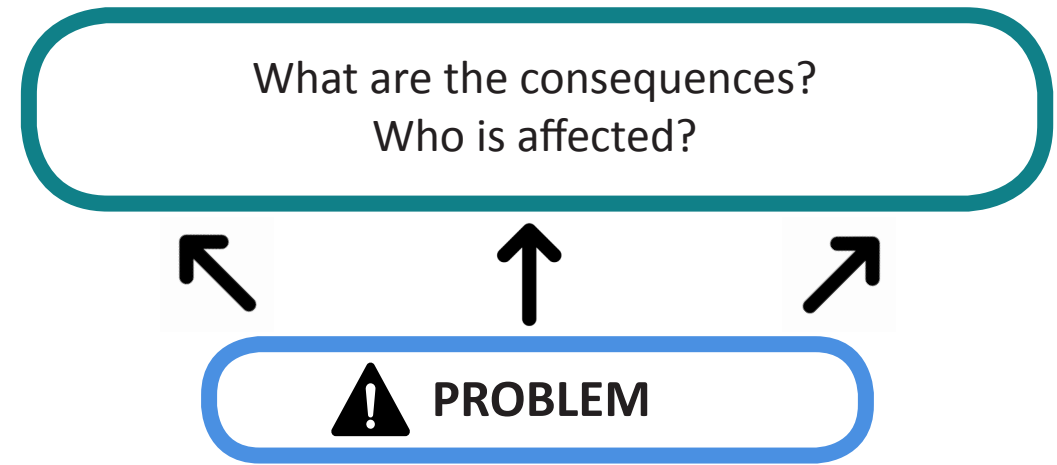
Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 2 Define and unpack the problem

## Problem analysis diagram



Click on the numbers to build this diagram

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

Adapted from Government Partnerships International (2019)





Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

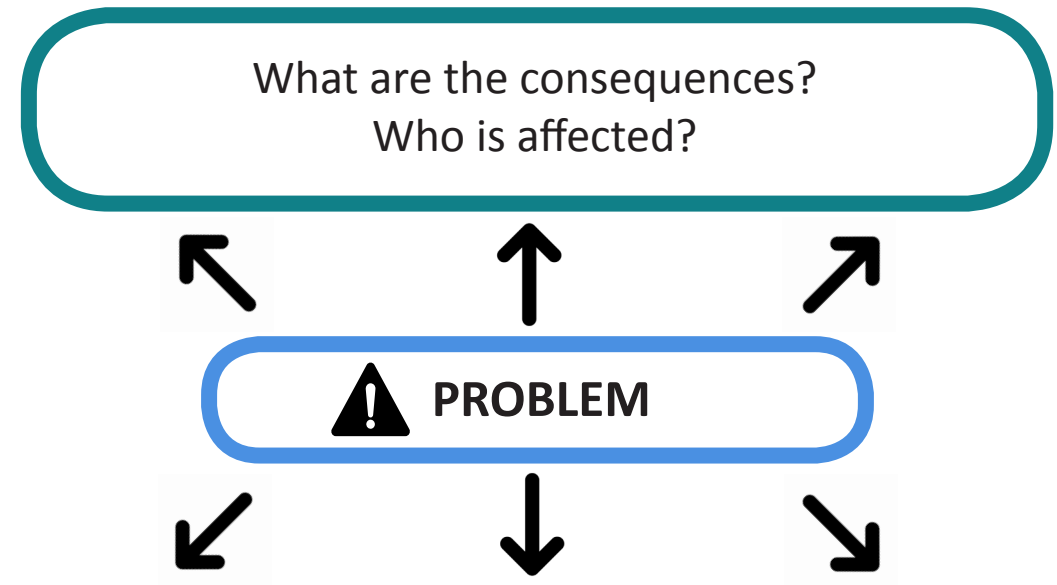
Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

### Theory of change process

#### Step 2 Define and unpack the problem

### Problem analysis diagram



Click on the numbers to build this diagram

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

Adapted from Government Partnerships International (2019)



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

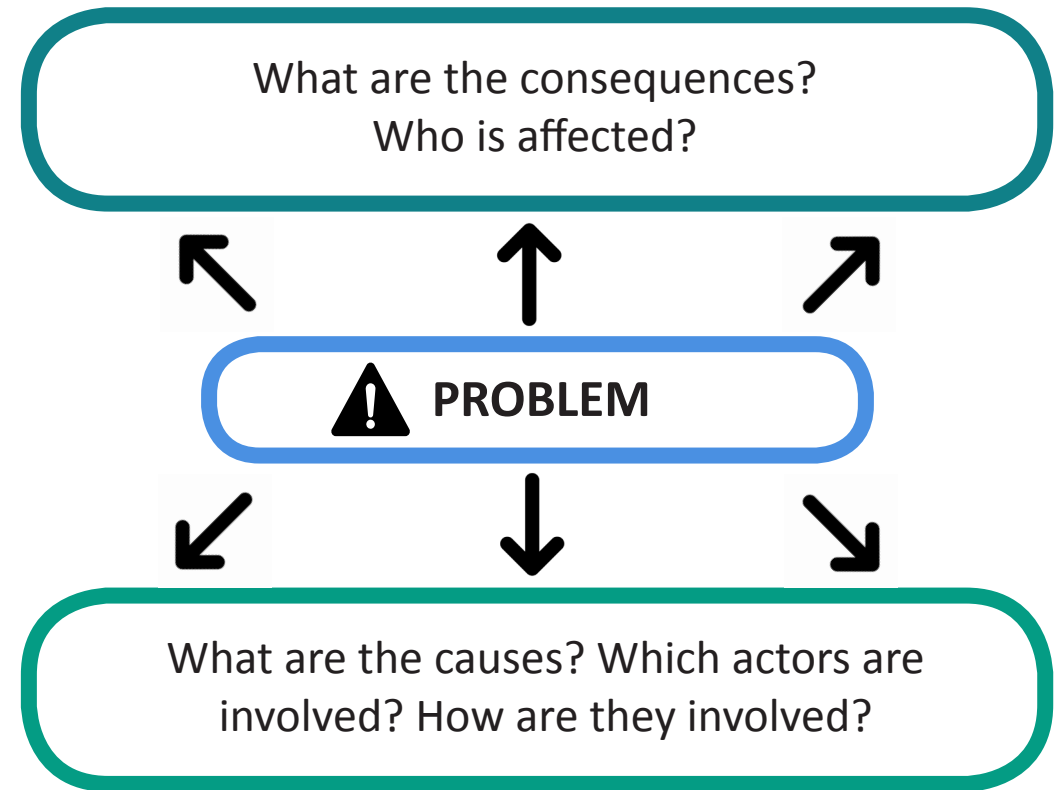
Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

### Theory of change process

#### Step 2 Define and unpack the problem

### Problem analysis diagram



Click on the numbers to build this diagram

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

Adapted from Government Partnerships International (2019)



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 3 Develop the causal pathway

The next step is to develop the causal pathway(s). The causal pathway articulates how change is assumed to come about; the links between an intervention’s inputs and activities and its intended results.

**Box 2:** To assist in defining results, the [UK Government’s Approach to Stabilisation](#) sets out three key principles that should underpin interventions in conflict and stabilisation contexts.

The three principles are:

- ‘Protect’ the means of survival and restore basic security;
- ‘Promote’ a political process to reduce violence; and
- ‘Prepare’ a foundation for longer term stability.

These principles should guide teams planning interventions.



**TOP TIP:** When developing the causal pathway, always start from the high-level goal. Avoid the temptation to start by deciding the activities and retrofitting the change process.



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 3 Develop the causal pathway



#### Defining change at different levels

When developing the causal pathway it is common to talk in terms of impact, outcomes and outputs. This is also the language of the results framework (which will be discussed in relation to 'monitoring'). It is important to remember that the ToC is not the same as the results framework. While the ToC does inform the results framework, they are different, and they serve different purposes.

Click on the hexagons on the right or scroll down to find out more





Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 3 Develop the causal pathway



Defining change at impact level

**IMPACT** is the positive (or negative), primary and secondary long-term effects that an intervention contributes to, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended.

Adapted from OECD (2002) p.24



**TOP TIP:** When defining the impact level change sought, start by reversing the problem statement. If the problem represents the 'current state' the inverse should represent something that looks like the desired 'future state' (or the longer term, higher level, cumulative improvement in wellbeing that intervention is contributing to). This is a good way to start the conversation to define intended change at the impact level.

In a complex conflict and stabilisation setting the intervention of a single actor will not, on its own, achieve the intended change at impact level.

Consider where the intervention sits in relation to that of other HMG interventions and those of external national and international actors.



Back to overview of change levels



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 3 Develop the causal pathway



Defining change at outcome level

**OUTCOME** refers to the likely or achieved short-term and medium-term effects of an intervention's outputs.

Source: OECD (2002) p.28



**TOP TIP:** When defining change at outcome level ask “**who** needs to do **what** differently? And “what are the **barriers** to this – capacity, opportunity and motivation?”. The [problem analysis](#) will help.

**Outcomes are often defined in terms of *behaviour changes* among individuals, groups, institutions or organisations.**

Behaviour can usefully be considered in terms of capability, motivation and opportunity (the conditions driving the practice). To successfully support behaviour change an intervention must consider these three factors. This is the COM-B approach, described by Michie *et al.* (2011).

In complex contexts, multiple behaviour changes may be required. Outcome level changes may be sequential, with one as a pre-condition for the next, or non-linear. In conflict and stabilisation settings where the pathway to outcomes and impact is uncertain, defining intermediate outcomes can help unpack thinking on the process of change and demonstrate progress.



Back to overview of change levels

[Click to view the COM-B approach](#)



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 3 Develop the causal pathway



Defining change at outcome level

## The COM-B approach



Click on the numbers to build this diagram

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

Source: Michie *et al.* (2011)



Back to overview of change levels



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

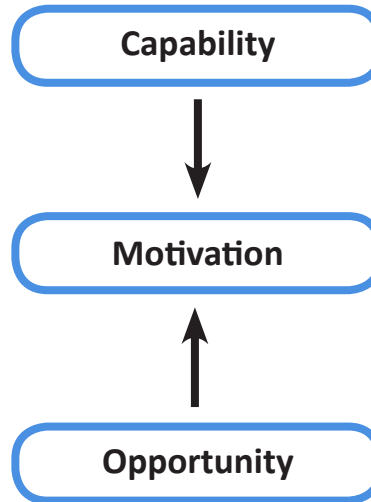
### Theory of change process

#### Step 3 Develop the causal pathway



Defining change at outcome level

### The COM-B approach



Click on the numbers to build this diagram

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

Source: Michie *et al.* (2011)



Back to overview of change levels





Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

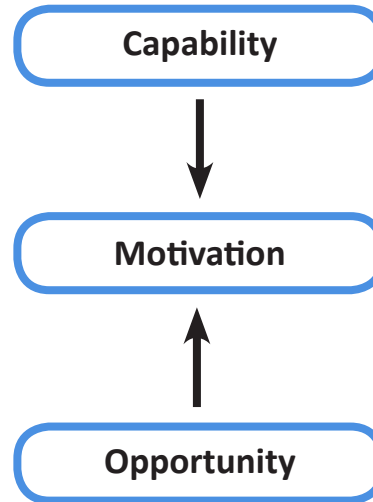
### Theory of change process

#### Step 3 Develop the causal pathway



Defining change at outcome level

### The COM-B approach



Psychological or physical ability to enact the behaviour



Click on the numbers to build this diagram

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

Source: Michie *et al.* (2011)



Back to overview of change levels



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

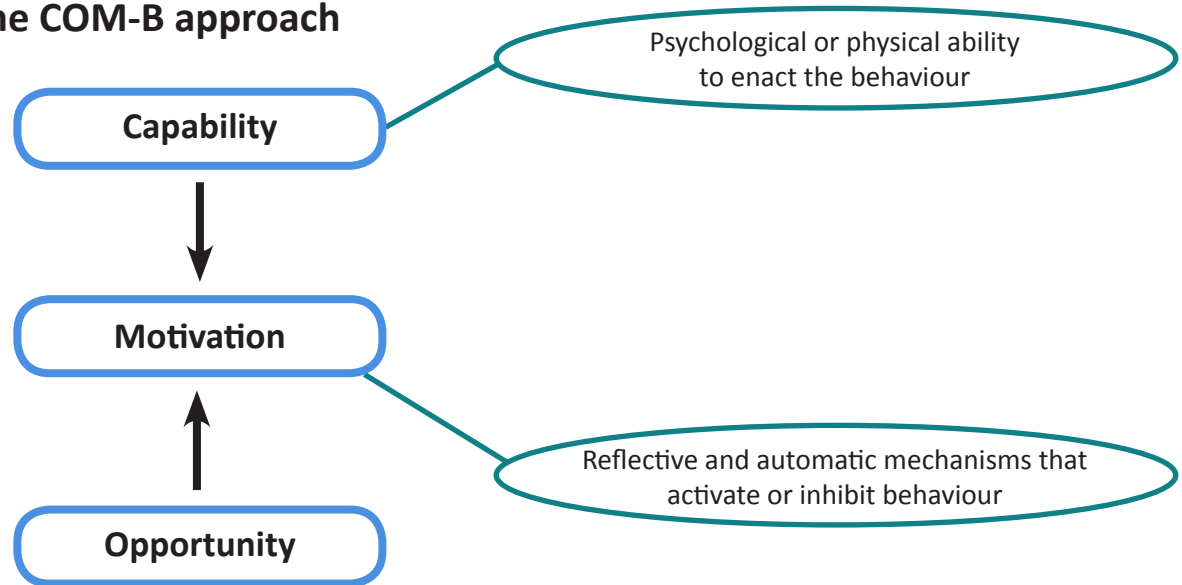
### Theory of change process

#### Step 3 Develop the causal pathway



Defining change at outcome level

### The COM-B approach



Click on the numbers to build this diagram

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

Source: Michie *et al.* (2011)



Back to overview of change levels



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

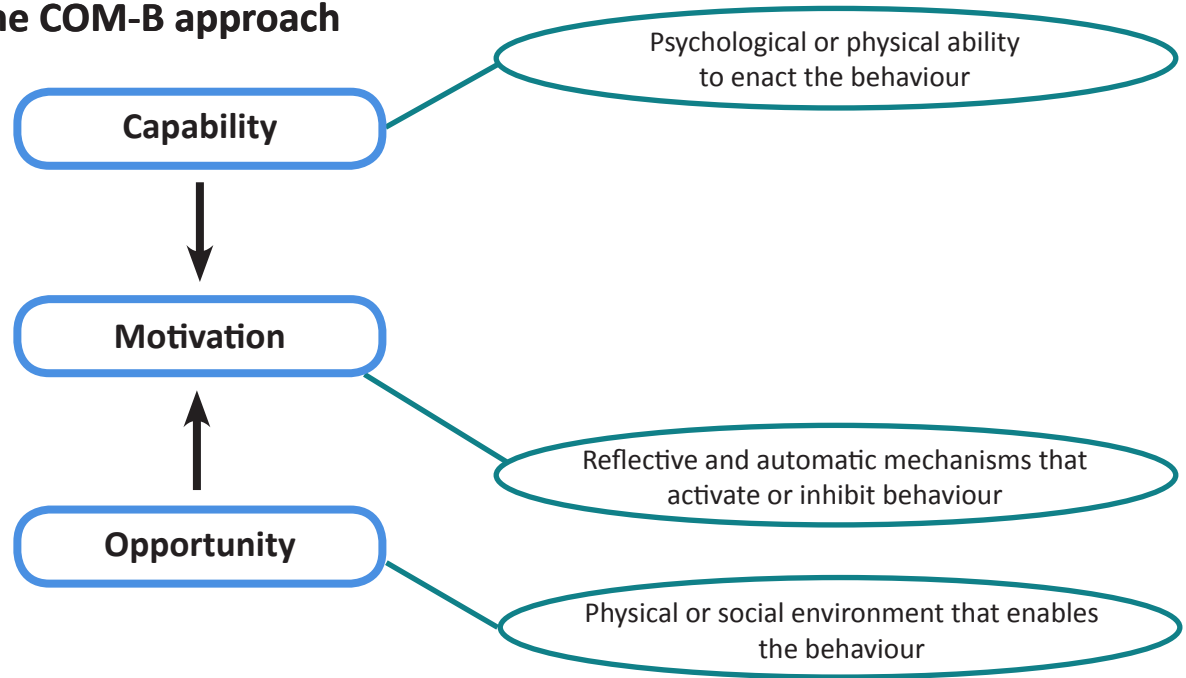
### Theory of change process

#### Step 3 Develop the causal pathway



Defining change at outcome level

### The COM-B approach



Click on the numbers to build this diagram

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

Source: Michie *et al.* (2011)



Back to overview of change levels



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

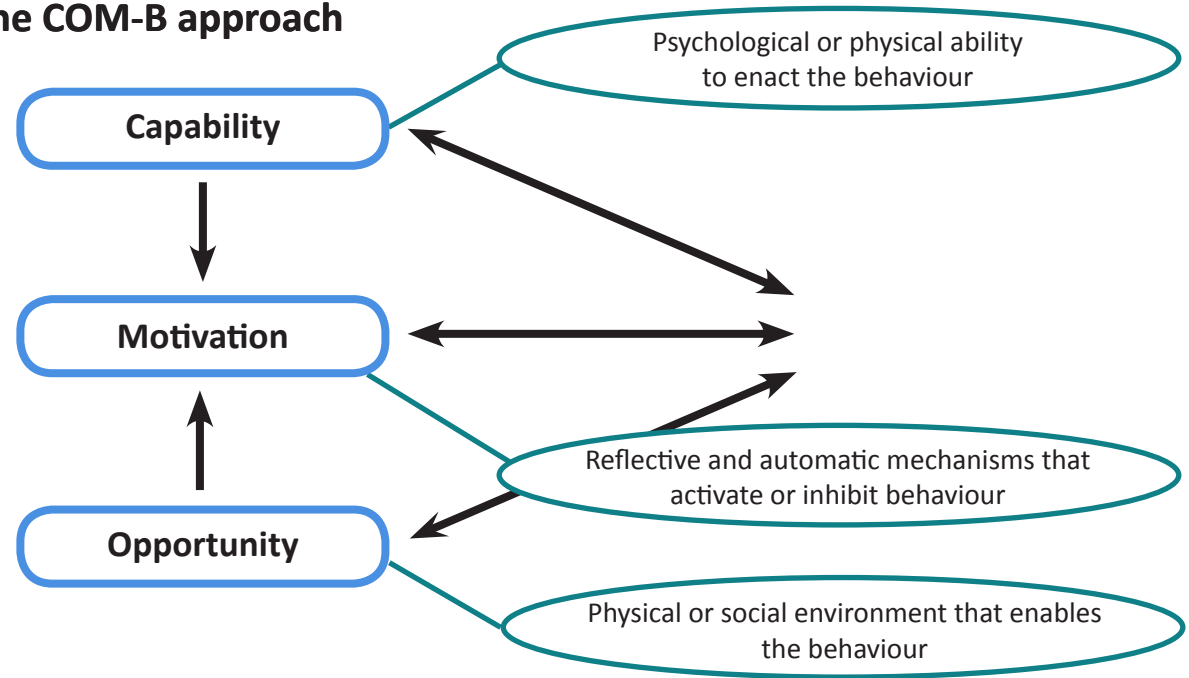
### Theory of change process

#### Step 3 Develop the causal pathway



Defining change at outcome level

### The COM-B approach



Click on the numbers to build this diagram

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

Source: Michie *et al.* (2011)



Back to overview of change levels



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

### Theory of change process

#### Step 3 Develop the causal pathway



Defining change at outcome level

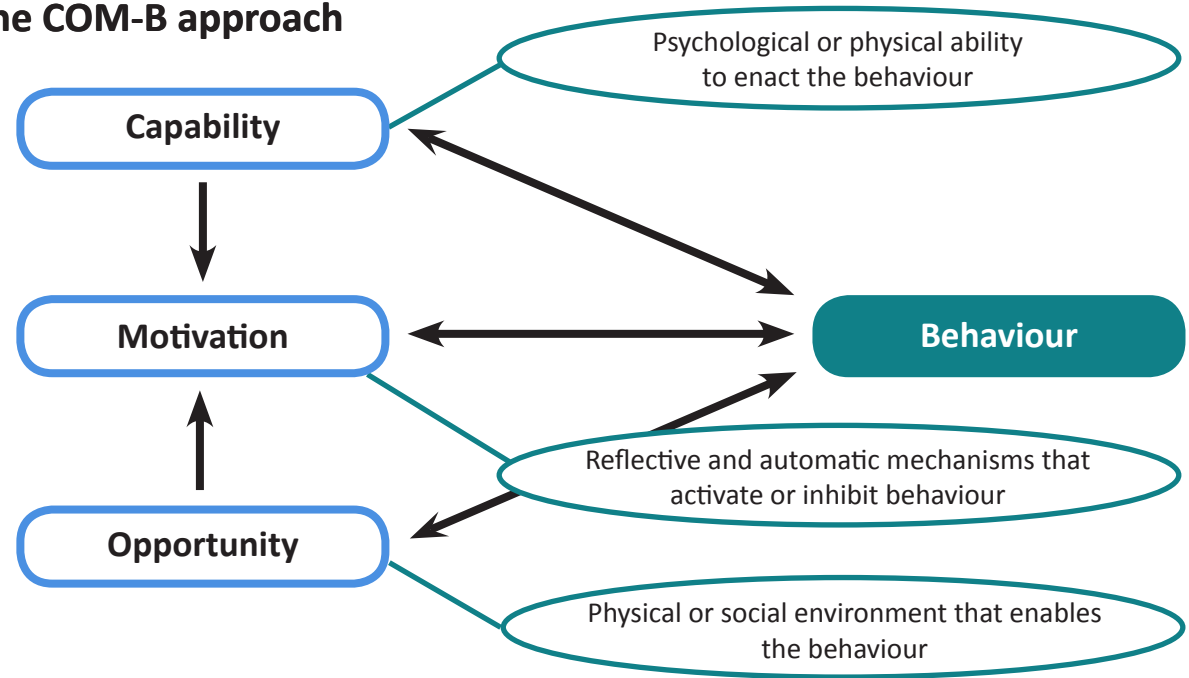


**TOP TIP:** When determining the shape an intervention will take, consider the **behaviour changes** that need to occur, the **reach** of the intervention and **reaction** that is needed from the target group(s).



Back to overview of change levels

### The COM-B approach



Click on the numbers to build this diagram

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

Source: Michie *et al.* (2011)



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 3 Develop the causal pathway



Defining change at output level

**OUTPUTS** are the tangible products, goods and services which result from an intervention's inputs and activities, e.g. skills/ capacity developed, policy briefs produced, specific advice or guidance delivered.

Adapted from OECD (2002) p.28; Bamberger *et al.* (2012)

The next stage involves identifying how to address the problem and bring about the intended change. The *solution* is constituted by an intervention's *inputs*, *activities* and *outputs*. At this stage we're essentially asking what we could or should do and brainstorming possible options.



Click on the tabs below to find out more



Outputs

Activities

Inputs



Back to overview of change levels



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 3 Develop the causal pathway



Defining change at output level

**ACTIVITIES** are the 'actions taken or work performed' in the implementation of an intervention, e.g. training and capacity building workshops, advisory secondment, research, and stakeholder consultations.

Adapted from OECD (2002) p.15

The next stage involves identifying how to address the problem and bring about the intended change. The *solution* is constituted by an intervention's *inputs*, *activities* and *outputs*. At this stage we're essentially asking what we could or should do and brainstorming possible options.



Click on the tabs below to find out more

Outputs



Activities

Inputs



Back to overview of change levels



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 3 Develop the causal pathway



Defining change at output level

**INPUTS** are the financial, human, and material resources used for the intervention, e.g. technical assistance, finance or material support.

Source: OECD (2002) p.25

The next stage involves identifying how to address the problem and bring about the intended change. The *solution* is constituted by an intervention's *inputs*, *activities* and *outputs*. At this stage we're essentially asking what we could or should do and brainstorming possible options.



Click on the tabs below to find out more

Outputs

Activities



Inputs



Back to overview of change levels





Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 3 Develop the causal pathway



Framework to develop causal pathways

Mayne (2015, Useful Theory of Change Models) provides a helpful framework for discussion when developing the casual pathway(s).



**TOP TIP:** While the diagram sets out the change process in a linear fashion, in reality change is rarely linear. Make sure that you reflect the complexity of the change process in your ToC discussions and in your final output.

Click to view a *Useful Theory of Change* diagram



**Theory of change** | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

**Step by step guide to developing a theory of change**

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

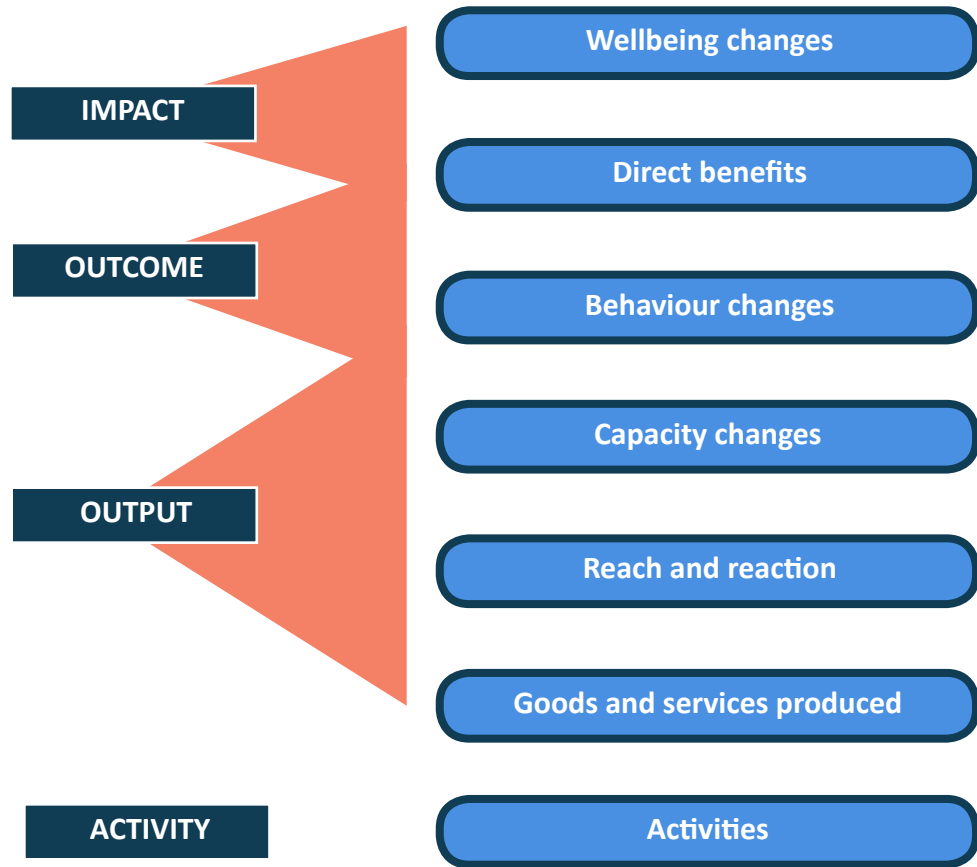
Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > **Step 3** > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

### Useful ToC diagram



Click on the numbers to build this diagram

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

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Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

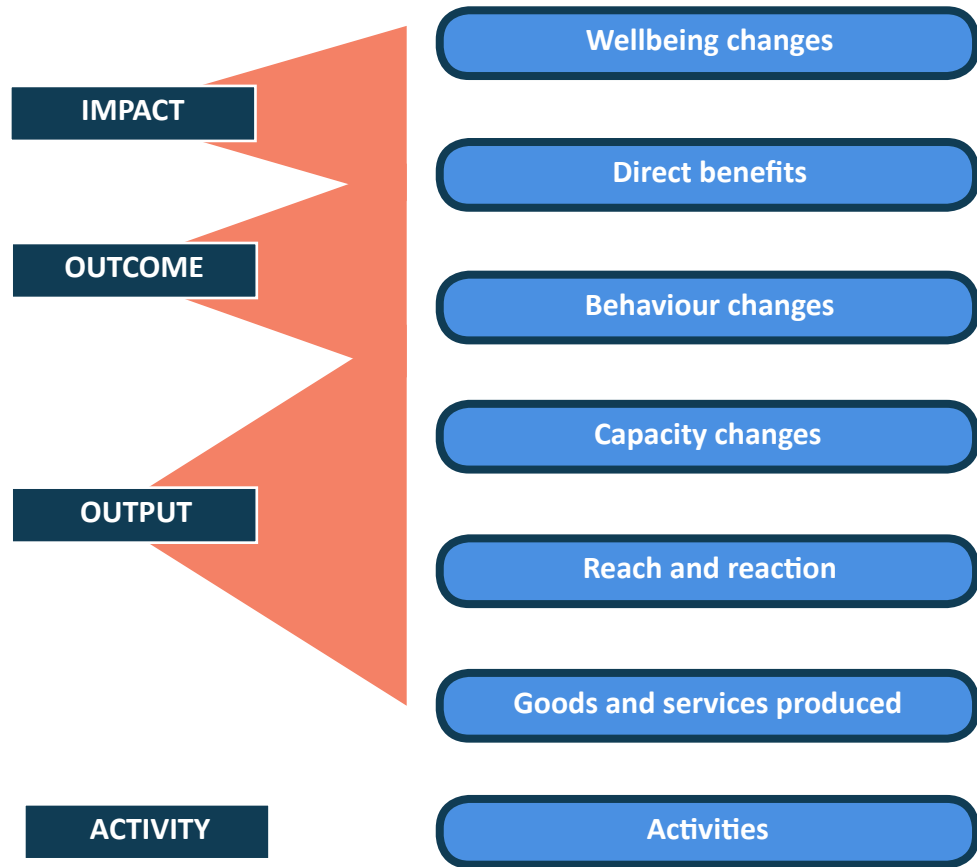
Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

Useful ToC diagram



What is the longer-term high level, cumulative improvement in wellbeing that the intervention will contribute to? Who are the beneficiaries/beneficiary groups who will benefit directly AND indirectly?

Click on the numbers to build this diagram

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
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- 7
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Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

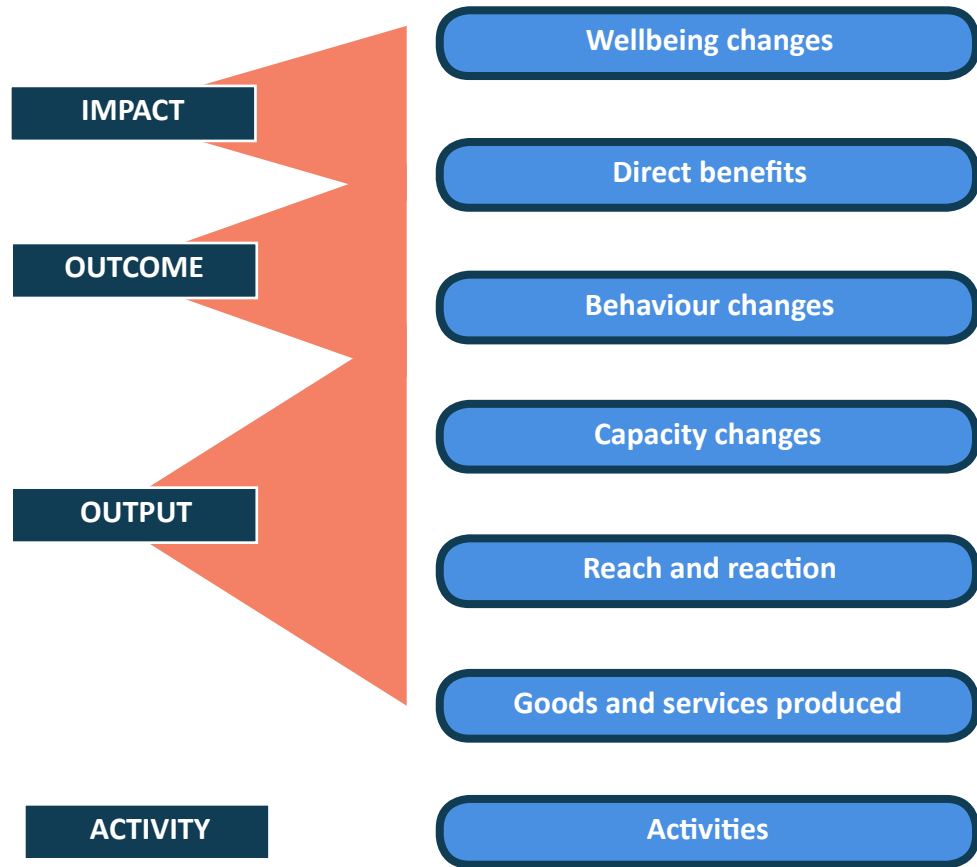
Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

Useful ToC diagram



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- 2
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- 4
- 5
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- 7
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- 11
- 12



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

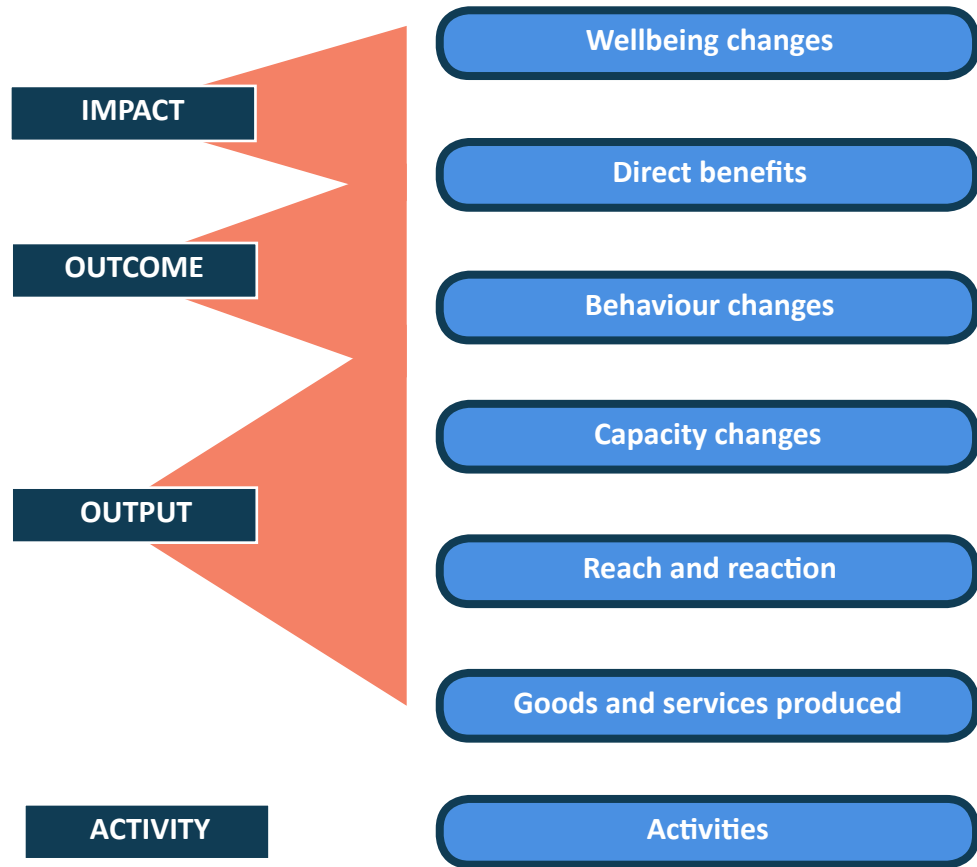
Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

Useful ToC diagram



What is the longer-term high level, cumulative improvement in wellbeing that the intervention will contribute to? Who are the beneficiaries/beneficiary groups who will benefit directly AND indirectly?



What are the specific improvements in the state of individual beneficiaries/beneficiary groups that the intervention will contribute to?

Click on the numbers to build this diagram

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

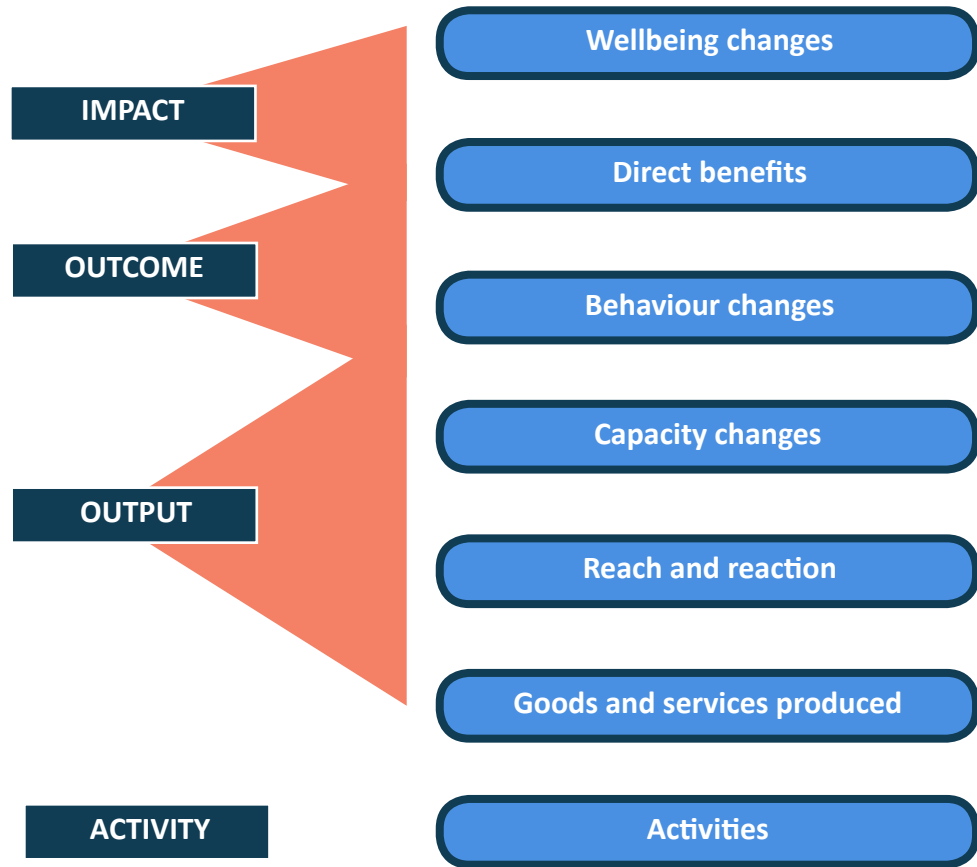
Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

Useful ToC diagram



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- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

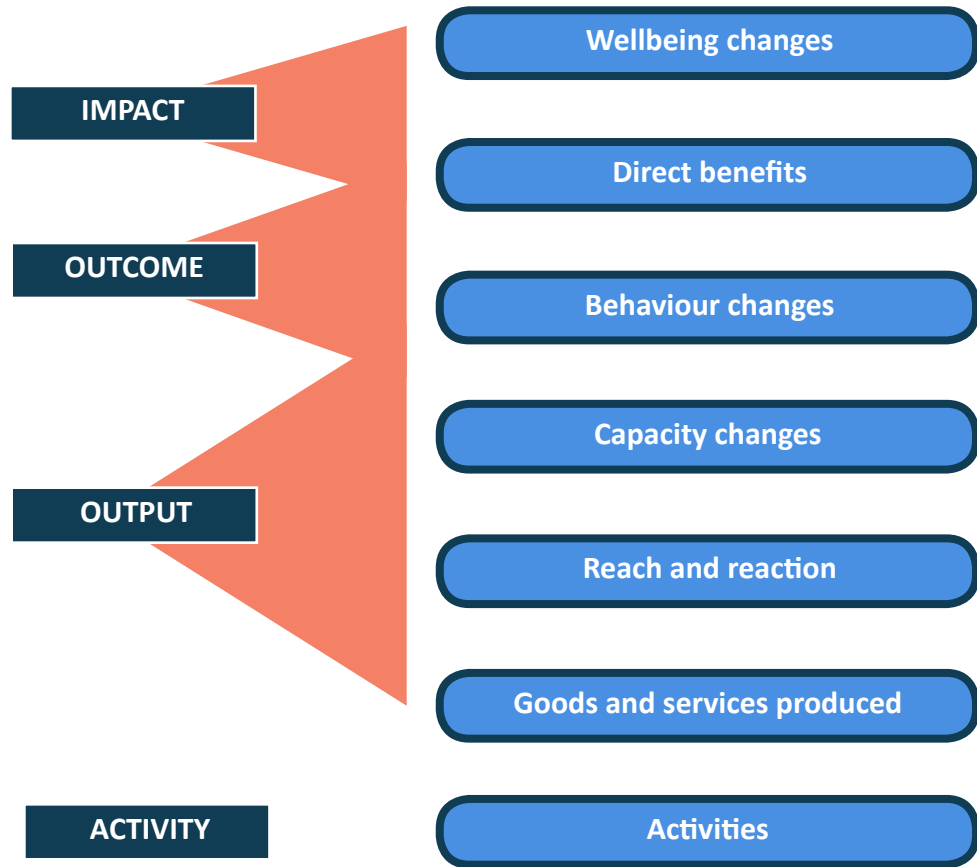
Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

Useful ToC diagram



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What are the behaviour changes/changes in practice that are required to bring about direct benefits and contribute to wellbeing changes? Which actors need to change? What are the barriers to these actors behaving differently?

Click on the numbers to build this diagram

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

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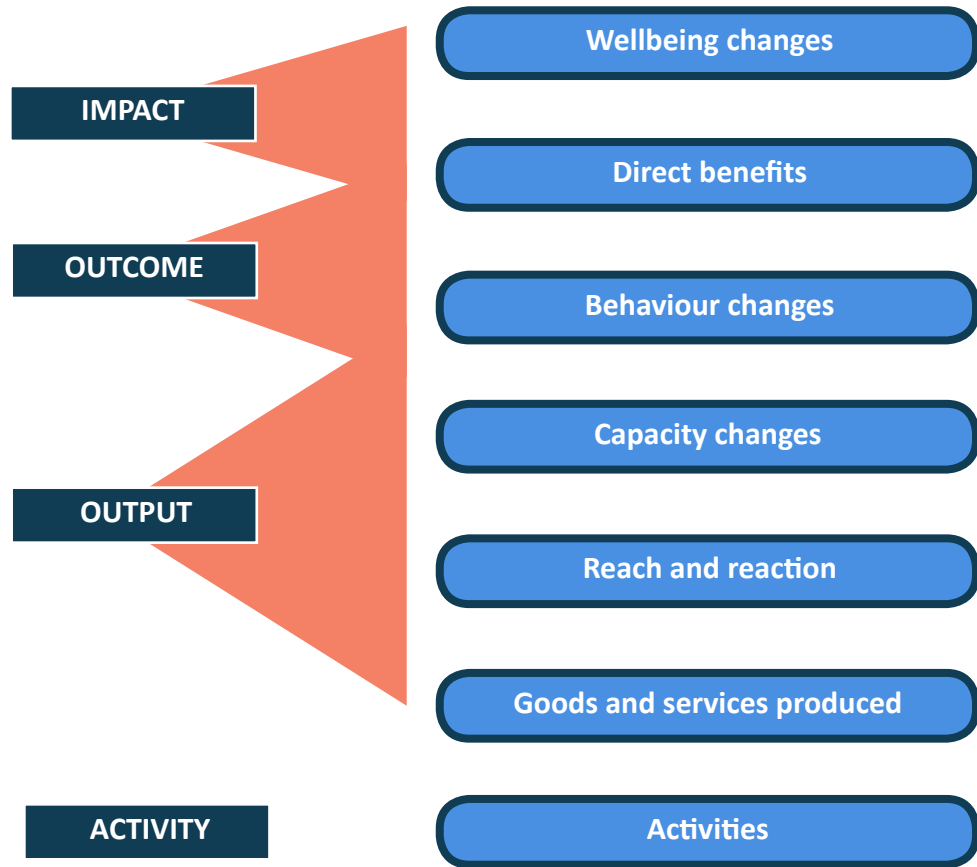
Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

Useful ToC diagram



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What can we do (actions) to address the barriers to behavioural change? Why might that work in the context?



Click on the numbers to build this diagram

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12





Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

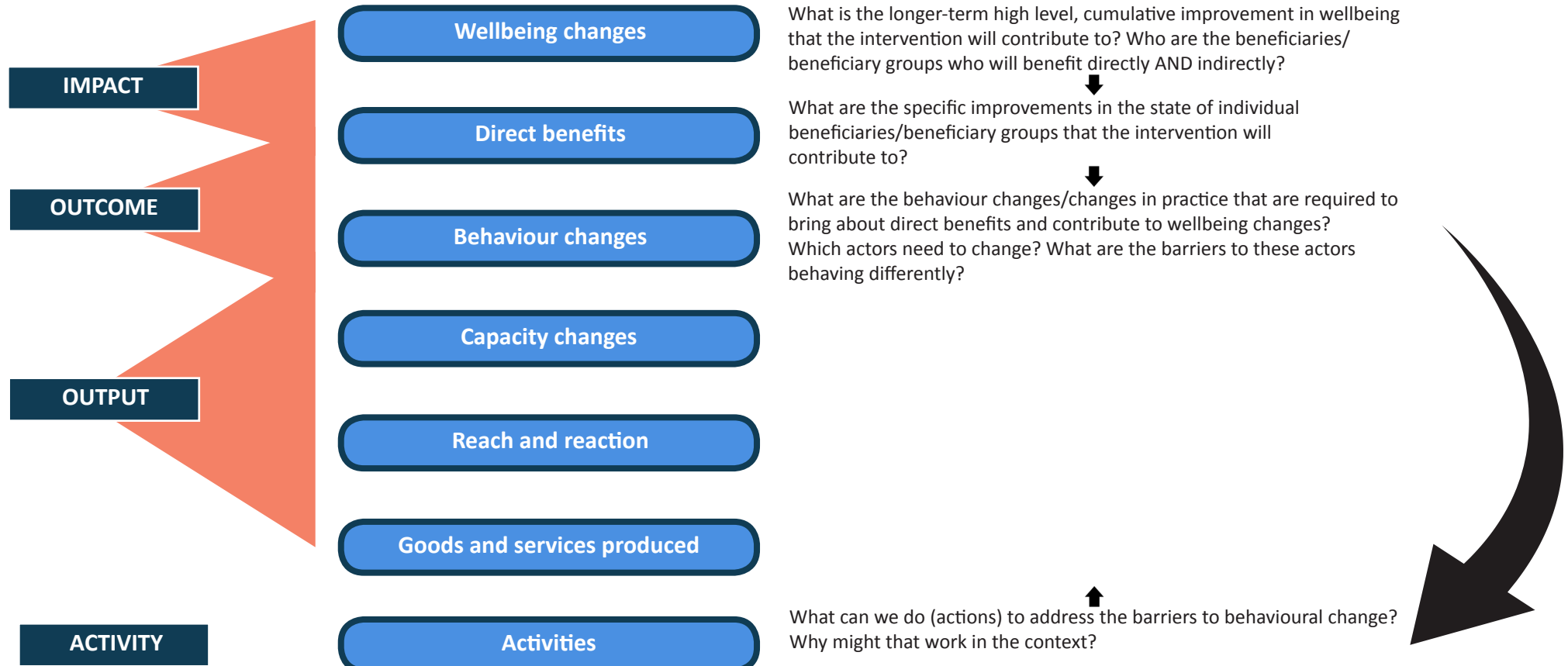
Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

Useful ToC diagram



Click on the numbers to build this diagram

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- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

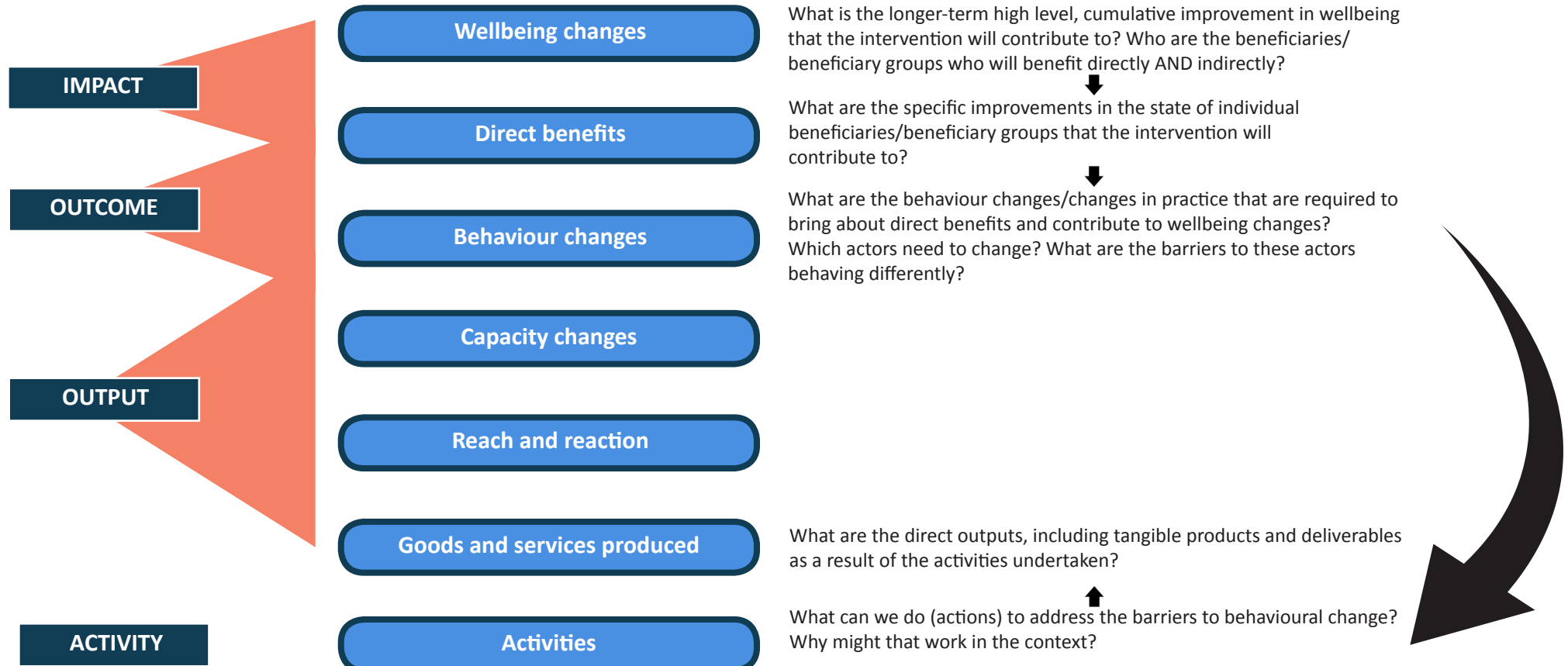
Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

Useful ToC diagram



Click on the numbers to build this diagram

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- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

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Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

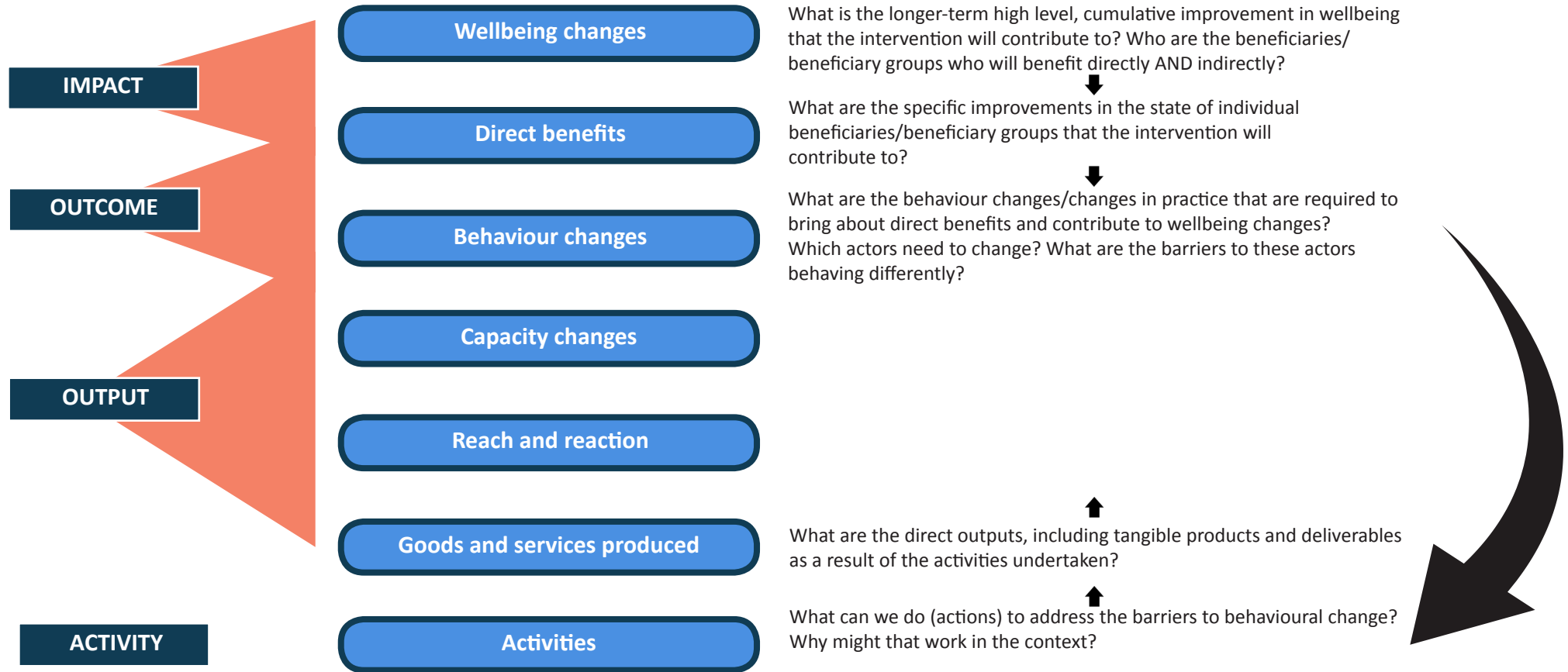
Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

Useful ToC diagram



Click on the numbers to build this diagram

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
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Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

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Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

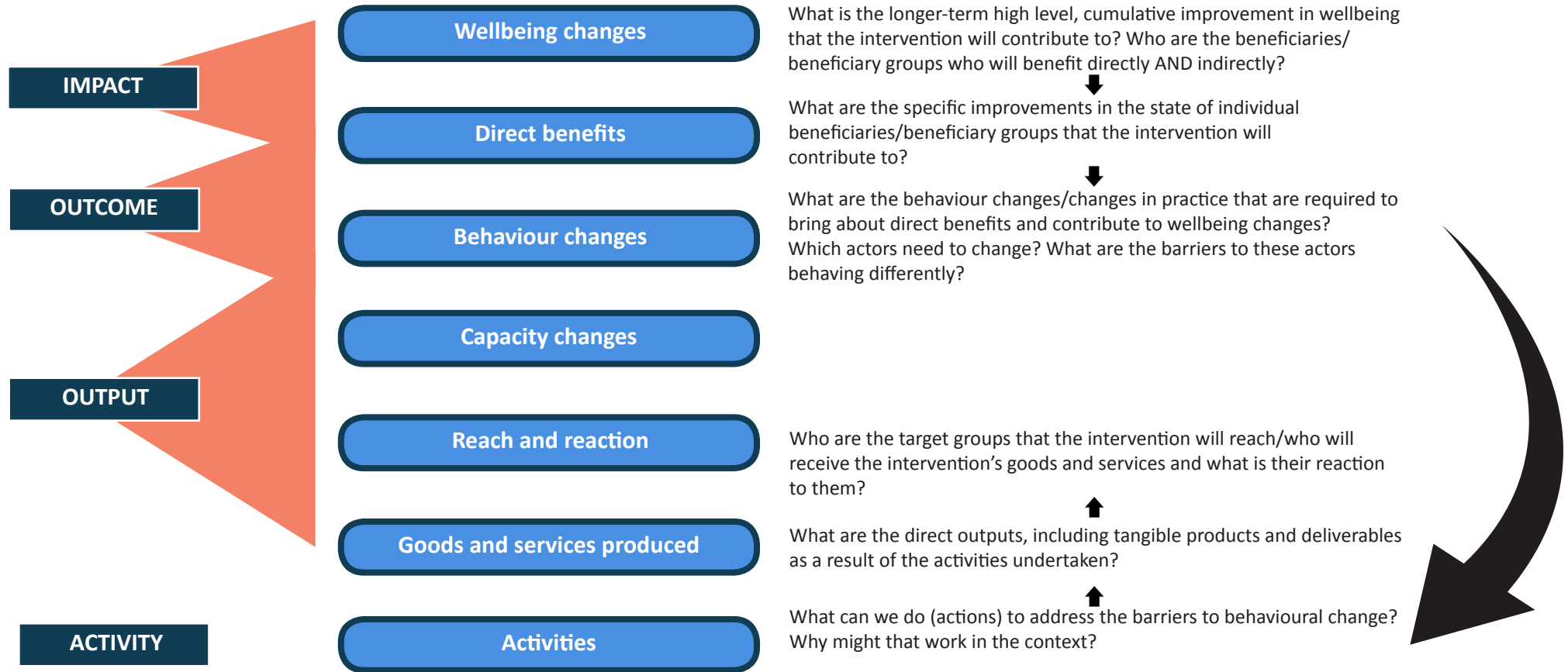
Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

Useful ToC diagram



Click on the numbers to build this diagram

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

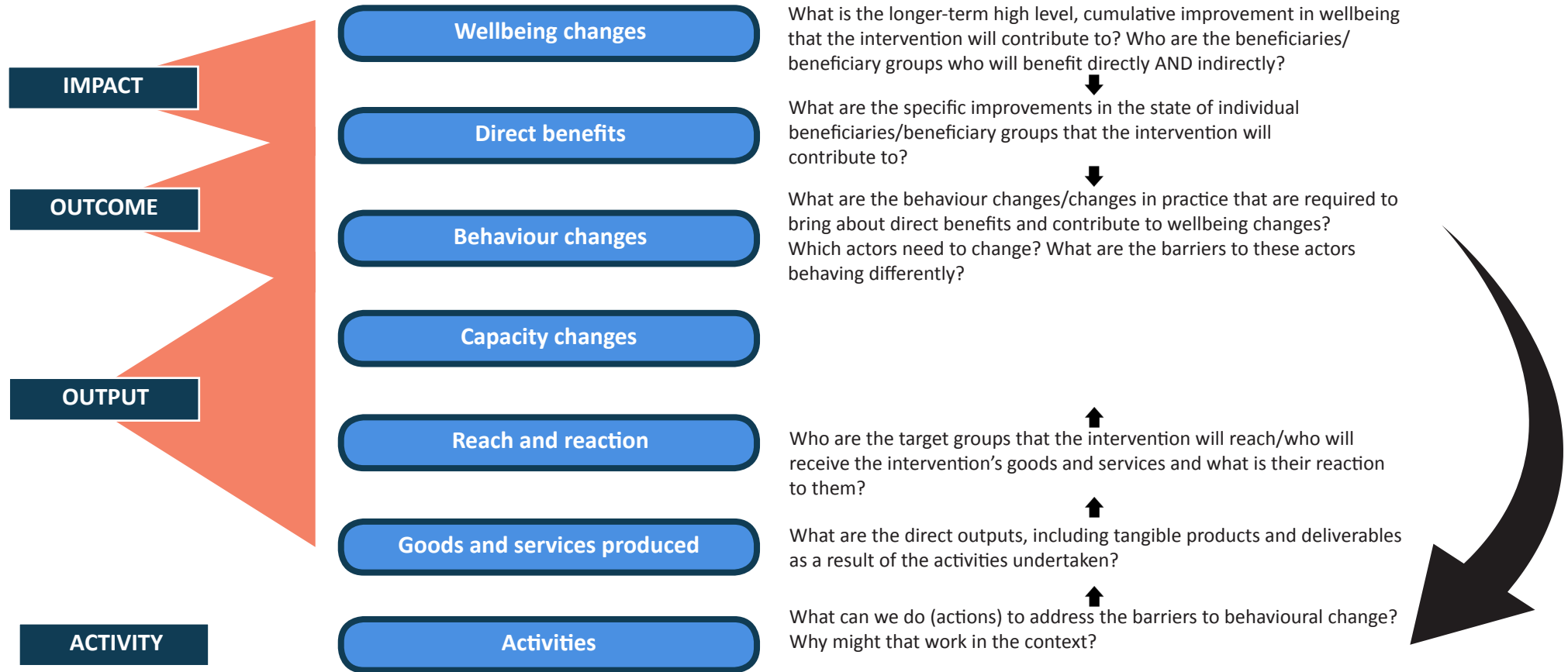
Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

Useful ToC diagram



Click on the numbers to build this diagram

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

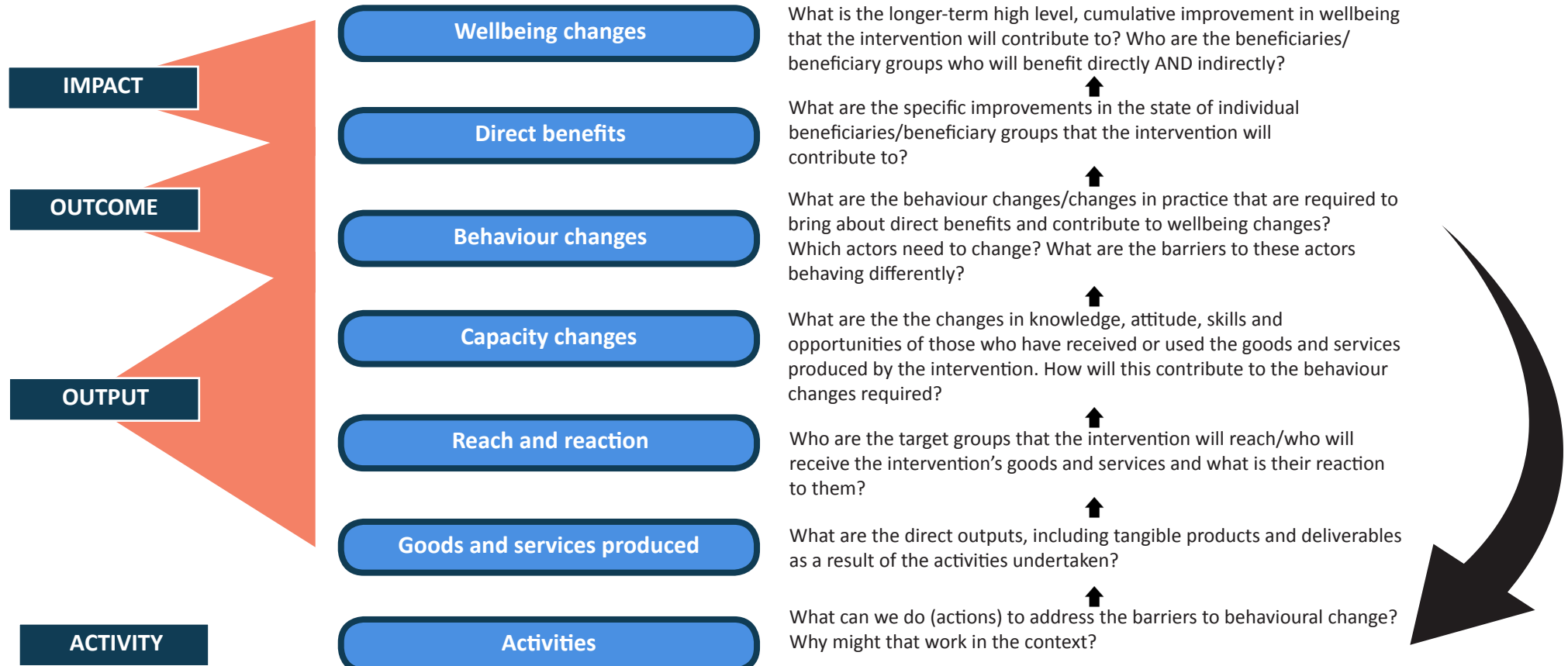
Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

Useful ToC diagram



Click on the numbers to build this diagram

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 3 Develop the causal pathway

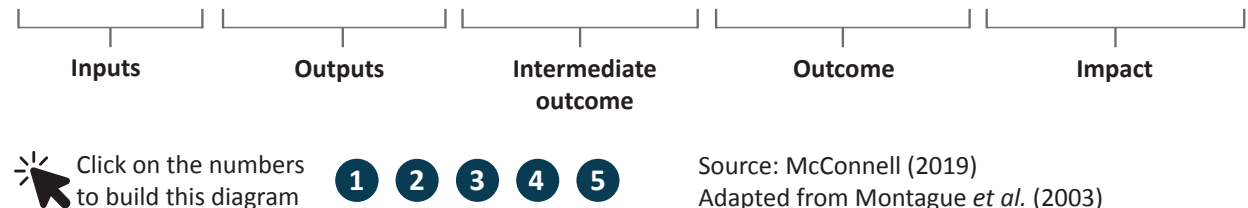


#### Defining realistic results

A common challenge for interventions in conflict and stabilisation settings is in understanding the nature of change that external interventions can realistically hope to bring about. It is important that the causal pathway (and corresponding results) are realistic. To help define realistic results it is useful to think in terms of the level of control that is possible through an intervention. Ensuring that results are clearly defined at the appropriate levels is critical for achieving them.

**Box 3:** The Stabilisation Unit's [Elite Bargains and Political Deals research project](#) discusses the pitfalls and policy dilemmas inherent to complex stabilisation and conflict environments.

## Spheres of influence diagram



Source: McConnell (2019)  
Adapted from Montague *et al.* (2003)



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

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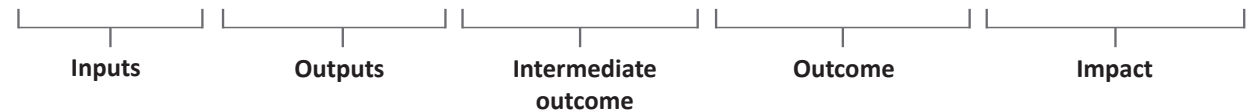


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Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

### Theory of change process

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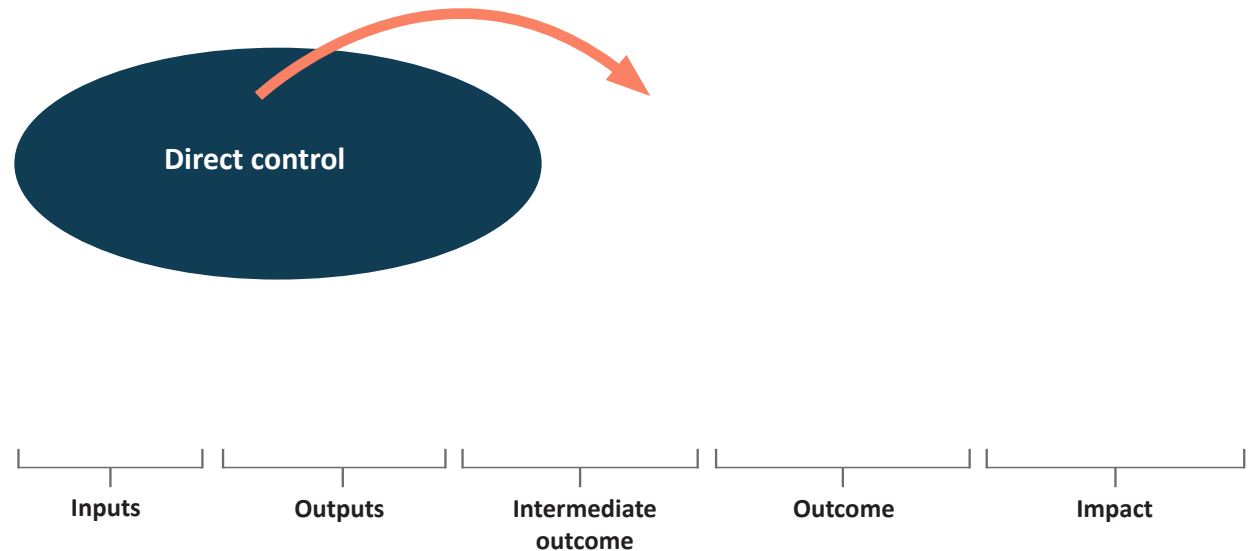


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Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

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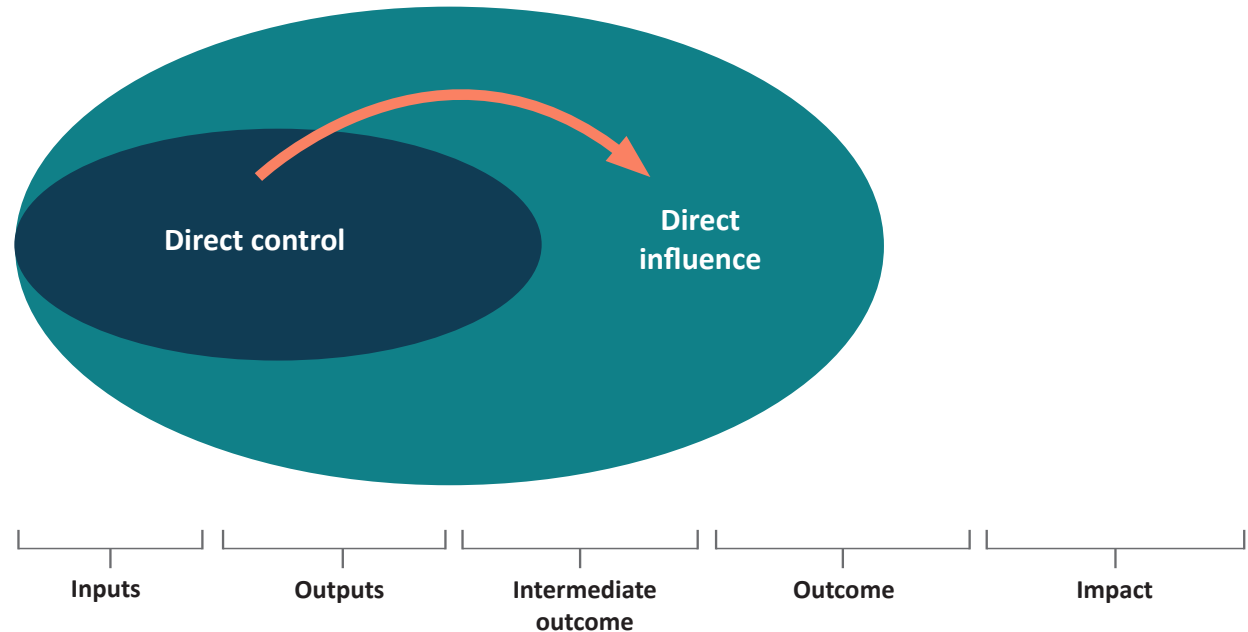


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Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

### Theory of change process

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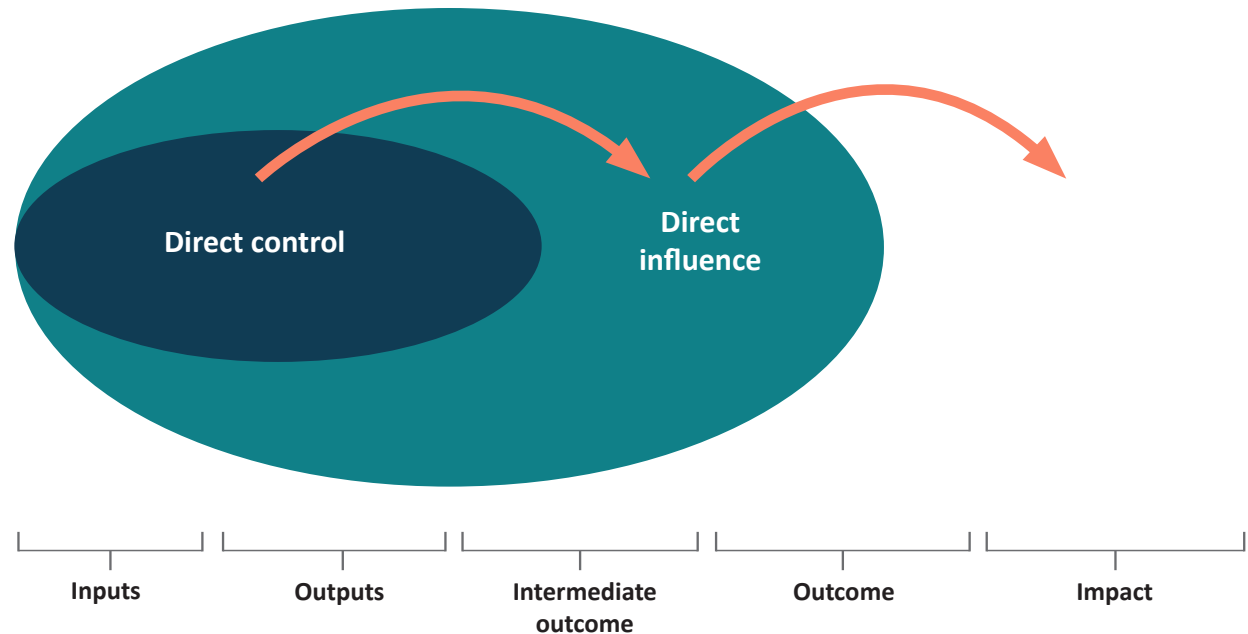


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Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5 > Step 6

### Theory of change process

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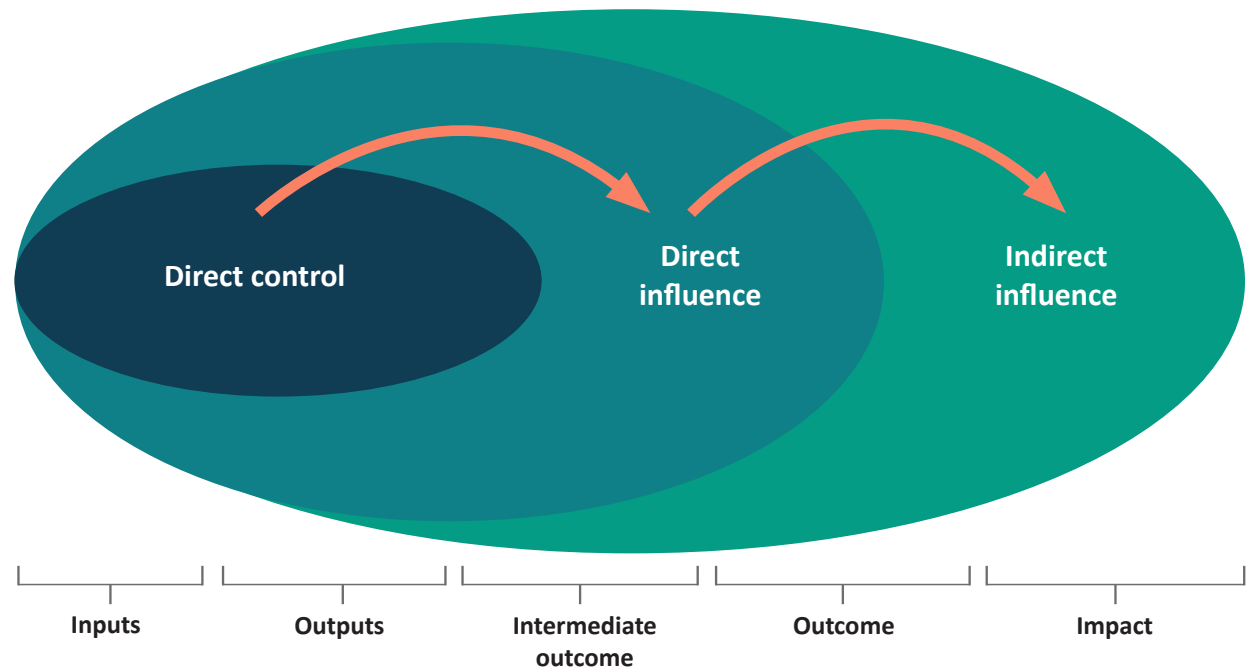


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**Theory of change** | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

**Step by step guide to developing a theory of change**

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > **Step 4** > Step 5 > Step 6

## Theory of change process

### Step 4 Map actors and other factors

**Interventions in conflict and stabilisation settings do not operate in a vacuum**; there are always other actors and external factors at play.

These actors and factors may facilitate or inhibit the success of the intervention. These dynamics should be exposed in the ToC process to support effective design of the intervention and the MEL system.



#### TOP TIP: Questions to ask...

1. Who else is operating in this space?
2. What are they trying to achieve?
3. How might they help/hinder you?
4. How might you affect them?
5. What other factors are outside of my control?

**Box 4:** The [UK Government's Approach to Stabilisation](#) and the Stabilisation Unit's [Elite Bargains and Pollical Deals research](#) highlights just how complex the political economy of conflict can be and suggests a number of key questions officials should ask of their programmes to ensure realism, retain a focus on the 'political' nature of their intervention and understand the inevitable dilemmas.



## Theory of change process

### Step 5 Articulate the assumptions

**Any intervention theory includes assumptions.**

These assumptions need to be made explicit in the theory of change. Assumptions may relate to:

- **causality:** the way(s) in which change is expected to happen and the mechanisms that are intended to support change;
- **implementation:** how an intervention will be undertaken, and the role of the partners involved;
- **context:** the external factors that may influence or have some bearing on the intervention.



**TOP TIP:** Be clear about the assumptions at each level of the theory of change.



## Theory of change process

### Step 6 Articulate the assumptions

**Evidence is fundamental to the credibility of a ToC.** The ToC should set out the range and quality of evidence that relates to *contextual understanding* (conflict and gender analysis, etc.), and to its *assumptions of causality* (referencing other interventions or research in similar contexts with similarly desirable outcomes).

In conflict and stabilisation settings, where there is often a lack of evidence, the ToC should identify evidence gaps and acknowledge the increased risk and uncertainty in undertaking interventions.



**TOP TIP:** Consider rating - red, amber, green (RAG) - the causal pathways and assumptions set out in the theory of change based on the strength of evidence that underpins them. Where evidence gaps exist, consider how a MEL system can help to fill them.



### Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

In conflict and stabilisation settings, it is imperative that interventions are both conflict-sensitive and gender-sensitive.

This is achieved by incorporating findings of the [conflict analysis](#) and [gender analysis](#) into the ToC.

 **Click on the tabs below to find out more**

**Integrating conflict sensitivity**

**Integrating gender sensitivity**



**TOP TIP:** Ensure that programme teams and implementing partners have the capacity and commitment to do this as part of intervention design, delivery, monitoring and evaluation.





Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

## Integrating conflict sensitivity

The theory of change must reflect where and how an intervention might create harm by considering how it may interact with conflict drivers and dynamics. These points are referred to as **conflict sensitivity risks**.

Identifying conflict sensitivity risks at the design phase allows for mitigation and appropriate monitoring to be built in to the MEL system.

Conversely, the ToC should also identify where and how the proposed activities may positively impact the drivers and dynamics identified in the conflict analysis. And, in the case of portfolios, the ToC should contribute to a cumulative impact on peace and stability.

If supporting peace and stabilisation is not a main objective of the intervention, is it nonetheless important to show how the intervention will capitalise on opportunities to positively contribute.

**Box 5: Integrating conflict sensitivity**

A minimum obligation for any intervention in/on conflict is that it minimises the risk of negative effects. Negative effects are frequently unforeseen and unintended and may include:

- worsening divisions between conflicting groups;
- increasing danger for participants in peace activities;
- reinforcing structural or overt violence.

It may not be possible to eliminate all risk of harm, but potential negative effects must be fully acknowledged, mitigated where possible, and balanced against positive benefits.

Source: DFID, cited in ICAI, p.28

## Integrating gender sensitivity



**Theory of change** | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

**Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity**

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

## Integrating gender sensitivity

The implications of the [gender analysis](#) should inform the ToC. The **problem statement** should be explicit about how the problem relates to women and men, girls and boys. The **causal pathway and intended results (impact, outcome, output level)** should reflect the **change the intervention** is seeking to achieve and for whom.

The ToC should draw out the gendered **assumptions** about the roles that different individuals and groups will play in the intervention and consider the implications of this.

For example, does the ToC for an intervention on countering violent extremism assume that men are the only group at risk of recruitment to extremist organisations?

**Box 6: Considering multiple dimensions of vulnerability**

When identifying desired changes, it is also important to consider the risks of negative impacts upon certain individuals or groups, and implications for intervention design. This applies not only to gender, but also to other aspects of identity and socio-economic background, including (dis)ability, age, ethnicity, political affiliations and socio-economic status.

[Click for an example of a gender-sensitive ToC](#)



## Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

**Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity**

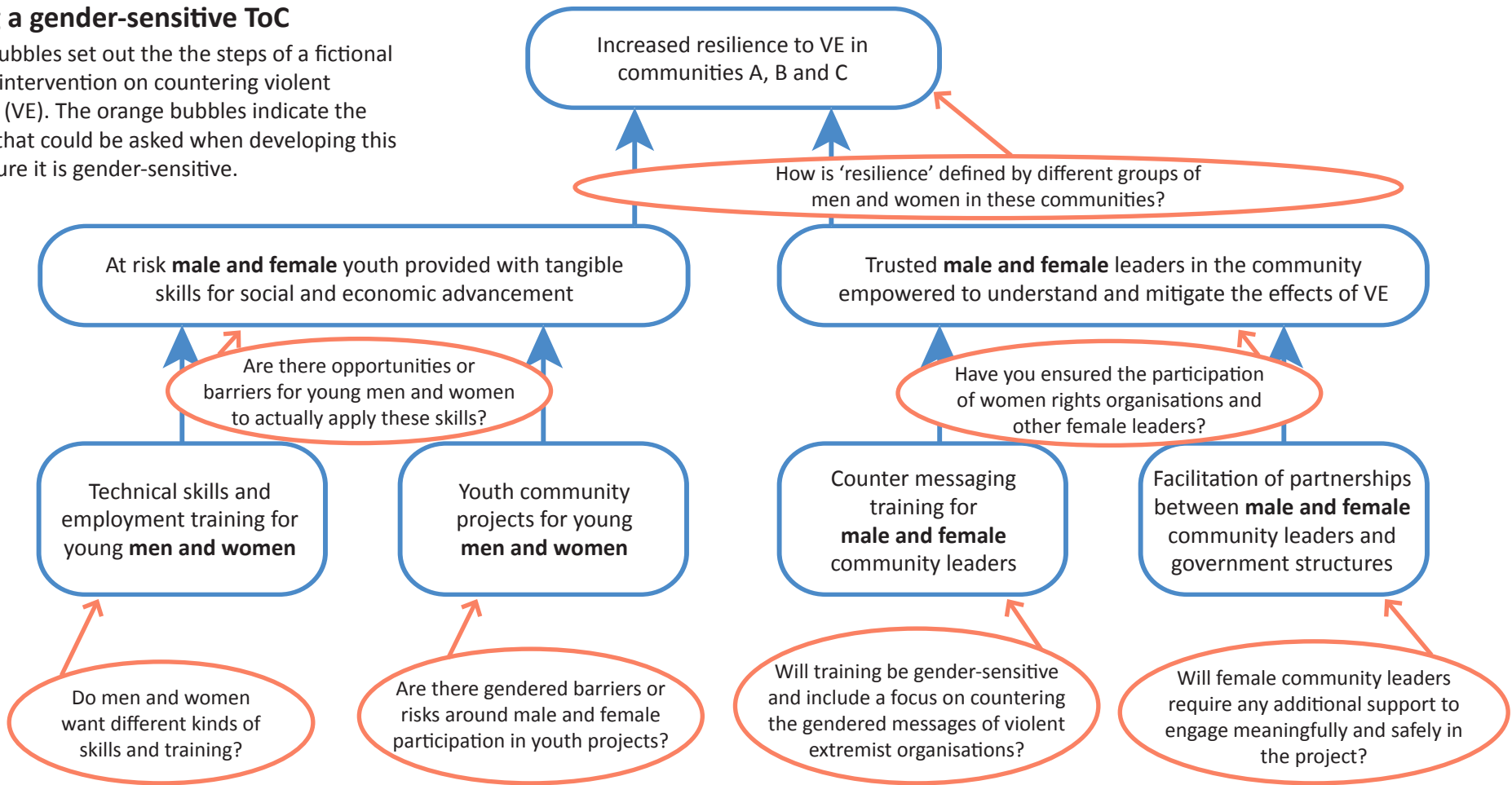
Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

### Creating a gender-sensitive ToC

The blue bubbles set out the the steps of a fictional ToC for an intervention on countering violent extremism (VE). The orange bubbles indicate the questions that could be asked when developing this ToC to ensure it is gender-sensitive.





## Presenting the theory of change

It is impossible to develop one single correct way to present a ToC that will work for all contexts. Theories of change will always vary depending on the perspectives of those involved in developing them, the process that is undertaken, the context and nature of the intervention, and the purpose that the theory of change is intended to serve.

While the steps presented here are set out in a neat linear fashion, in reality the ToC may be generated in one (or a series) of collaborative workshop sessions where steps may happen in a more fluid way.

**The important thing is that the process works for you, your team and your stakeholders.**



### TOP TIPS:

1. The ToC should **include a diagram and a narrative**. The narrative should explain the diagram.
2. Consider developing **different versions for different stakeholders** (e.g. a version for external communications; a high-level version for strategic stakeholders; and a more detailed version for those involved in operational management).
3. For more complex programmes, consider developing *nested theories of change* to allow space to explore different components in more detail.



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

When planning to develop or refresh a theory of change remember:

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Be realistic:</b> Don't be overly ambitious on the change your intervention can achieve.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Define everything:</b> Avoid sweeping statements and broad definitions of target groups such as 'youth' or 'communities'.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Challenge the logic:</b> Challenge colleagues and partners to clearly articulate why they believe the approach will work and the strength of the supporting evidence.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Consult widely:</b> Including programme managers, country and thematic experts, implementing partners, end users/beneficiaries and other stakeholders with technical or local contextual knowledge.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Review regularly:</b> Consider the ToC as a live document (especially important in dynamic conflict and stabilisation settings) and use it to identify key areas for monitoring, evaluating, learning and adapting. Revisit it frequently and test whether the theory and assumptions still hold or whether you need to adapt your intervention.

Click to view the Theory of Change Quality Assurance Checklist



**Theory of change** | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

**Tips and tools**

Further reading

**Theory of Change (ToC) Quality Assurance Checklist**

**ToC process**

**ToC Quality Indicators**

<b>The ToC process</b>	<b>Y/N</b>
The ToC has been developed through a collaborative process involving a broad range of stakeholders representing different roles in the intervention.	
There has been an attempt to represent the views, perspectives and experiences of end users and persons affected by the change in the ToC development process.	
There has been an attempt to systematically assess the strength of evidence and assumptions underpinning the ToC.	
The ToC process was facilitated by a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practitioner or social researcher.	

**Click on the tabs above to find out more**

Adapted from: M&E Unit CSSF Eastern Africa: Itad Ltd and Altai Consulting (2017)



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

Further reading

Theory of Change (ToC) Quality Assurance Checklist

ToC process

ToC Quality Indicators

Click on the tabs above to find out more

ToC Quality Indicators	Y/N
Contextual factors are clearly articulated in the ToC.	
The problem to be addressed and results to be achieved are clearly defined and realistic.	
There is a plausible and clear causal logic that includes the range of factors/actors that will contribute to change. There are no large leaps of faith/gaps in the logic.	
Time-contingent aspects and critical feedback loops are explicit.	
Assumptions are clearly articulated and realistic in the ToC.	
The ToC refers to evidence, knowledge and lessons learned from credible sources and acknowledges the limitations of the available evidence.	
The ToC considers the role of external actors/factors. It does NOT place the intervention at the centre whilst neglecting the role of wider HMG and other actors.	
Relevant conflict sensitivity risks are identified in the ToC.	
The ToC considers the differential needs/experiences of women and men, girls and boys and other groups (as appropriate).	

Adapted from: M&E Unit CSSF Eastern Africa: Itad Ltd and Altai Consulting (2017)



**Theory of change** | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a theory of change

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Presenting the theory of change

Tips and tools

**Further reading**

## For practical support to enhance your theory of change process:

- Comic Relief (2011) Cathy James, [Theory of Change Review](#).
- Corlazzoli, V. and White, J. (2013a) [Practical Approaches to Theories of Change in Conflict, Security, and Justice Programmes](#). Search for Common Ground.
- Koleros, A. and Oldenbeuving, M. (2018) [Approaches for addressing complexity in programme theory: Experiences in applying the Actor-based Change \(ABC\) Framework to a variety of international development programmes and evaluations](#). Presentation to the UK Evaluation Society, Annual Evaluation Conference.
- Rogers, P. (2014) [Theory of Change](#), Methodological Briefs, Impact Evaluation No. 2, UNICEF Office of Research.
- Stabilisation Unit (2016) [Conflict Sensitivity: Tools and Guidance](#).

## These websites also provide resources and support:

- [Center for Theory of Change](#)
- [Better Evaluation](#)

## For more on theory of change as a concept and its practical application:

- Mayne, J. (2015) [Useful Theory of Change Models](#). *Canadian Journal of Programme Evaluation*, Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 119-142.
- Vogel, I. (2012) [Review of the use of 'Theory of Change' in international development: review report](#). Department for International Development.





Theory of change | **Monitoring** | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a results framework

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Intervention management

Tips and tools

Further reading

**MONITORING** is a continuous function that uses systematic collection and analysis of data on specified indicators to provide management, and the main stakeholders of an ongoing intervention, with information on extent of progress and to support decision-making.

Adapted from OECD (2002) pp. 27-28

A MEL system requires a means to monitor the context in which an intervention takes place and the progress of an intervention towards achieving its stated results.

Monitoring involves routine data collection around indicators that reflect the theory of change.

For UK government interventions, there are a variety of tools and processes that incorporate monitoring. The results framework is the main tool for monitoring implementation progress of an intervention. The results framework is the main focus of this chapter (the term ‘results framework’ is often used interchangeably with a ‘logical framework’ or ‘logframe’).



[Theory of change](#) | [Monitoring](#) | [Evaluation](#) | [Learning](#)

[Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?](#)

[Step by step guide to developing a results framework](#)

[Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity](#)

[Intervention management](#)

[Tips and tools](#)

[Further reading](#)

## Why is monitoring useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

The results framework is useful to support:

- **accountability** by reflecting results achieved along an anticipated pathway (the [theory of change](#)), providing a basis for transparency and critique;
- **progress monitoring** by providing a framework for monitoring progress in implementation and towards pre-determined milestones and targets;
- **learning and adaptation** by providing a basis for assessing where an intervention is or is not achieving progress and taking decisions about adapting accordingly.

### Box 7: Challenges of the results framework

Using results frameworks in complex conflict and stabilisation contexts can be a challenge. **Common criticisms** are that results frameworks:

- assume that a causal pathway can be known in advance;
- oversimplify ‘messy’ realities;
- provide incentives to deliver against them, rather than to learn and adapt.

However, many of these issues are more to do with the way the results framework is perceived and used, as opposed to the approach itself. It is possible to apply the results framework approach in complex and emergent environments. One way is to identify a core set of **‘bedrock’ indicators** that remain fixed throughout the lifetime of an intervention. This involves having relatively concrete outcome and impact indicators, with greater flexibility at the lower levels of the results chain (outputs, activities).

Another option is the use of **‘categorical’ indicators** which allow greater flexibility within a results framework for diverse or complex programmes. There is ongoing discussion around the efficacy of the results framework and the development of alternative approaches that may be more suited to interventions in complex conflict and stabilisation environments. But for now, the results framework remains the most commonly used approach.



## Step by step guide to developing a results framework

A results framework may be a matrix, flowchart, or graphic. There is no single correct format. Within the UK Government, a common template is used by DFID and the CSSF.

Whatever the chosen format, a results framework consists of several important elements:

- **results chain;**
- **indicators;**
- **data sources;**
- **baselines, milestones and targets;**
- **risks and assumptions.**

There should be clear read-across between an intervention's ToC and its results framework, although there is no need to include everything set out in the ToC.



## Results framework process

### Step 1 Articulate the results chain

The results chain links the intervention's intended results (impact and outcome level) to the proposed solution (activities and outputs) as outlined in the [theory of change](#).

The aim of the results chain is to identify critical steps that will indicate progress towards results and translate these into the results framework.

See also '[Defining results at different levels](#)'.



**TOP TIP:** In conflict and stabilisation interventions, defining appropriate outcome statement(s) is often a challenging part of results framework design.

Top tips are:

- Be clear, precise and straightforward.
- Respond to the question: "Who needs to do what differently?"
- Ensure the outcome is achievable within the life of the intervention.



Theory of change | **Monitoring** | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

**Step by step guide to developing a results framework**

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Intervention management

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > **Step 2** > Step 3 > Step 4 > Step 5

## Results framework process

### Step 2 Select the indicators

Indicators describe how a particular result in the results chain is measured. Indicators are pieces of data that ‘indicate’ progress towards impact, outcomes or outputs.

When developing indicators, it is important to ensure they are ‘**SMART**’:

- S**pecific
- M**easurable
- A**chievable
- R**ealistic
- T**ime-bound



**TOP TIP:** When selecting indicators ask...

- What would I measure if I could measure anything?
- What can I measure?
- Is it good enough?

Indicators can be quantitative and qualitative. A good results framework should contain a mix of both. While realities of the impact of conflict may be detectable through **quantifiable indicators** (such as incidents of violence or mortality rates), many of the things we wish to monitor in a conflict or stabilisation setting are **intangible and subjective** (such as perceptions of safety, community cohesion, inclusive dialogue or accountability of state institutions). Intangible and subjective types of change require qualitative measures.



Theory of change | **Monitoring** | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

**Step by step guide to developing a results framework**

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Intervention management

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > **Step 3** > Step 4 > Step 5

## Results framework process

### Step 3 Identify the data sources

The data source provides the information required for the indicator. When developing indicators, you must ensure there is a viable and reliable data source for the indicator. **Indicators at all levels of the results chain require a data source.**

In conflict and stabilisation settings finding reliable and appropriate data can be challenging. This can be due to restrictive security, inaccessible geographic areas, the lack of institutions or agencies to provide reliable data or sensitive topics that national authorities do not want to publish data on.



**TOP TIP:** Before committing to new primary data collection, consider and make use – where possible - of national data systems, or data collected by other interventions or organisations (other UK interventions, the UN, local NGOs, CSOs academic or research centres and universities). Where there is no other option, parallel reporting systems should be designed in such a way that they do not undermine national reporting systems.

At output level, *project records* typically provide a reasonable data source, as outputs are within an intervention’s control and data should be readily available. At outcome and impact level, indicators will often need externally-sourced data (although this depends on the outcomes themselves and the indicators to measure them).

See also ‘[Spheres of influence](#)’.

[Click to view the data sources to consider](#)



Theory of change | **Monitoring** | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

**Step by step guide to developing a results framework**

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Intervention management

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > **Step 3** > Step 4 > Step 5

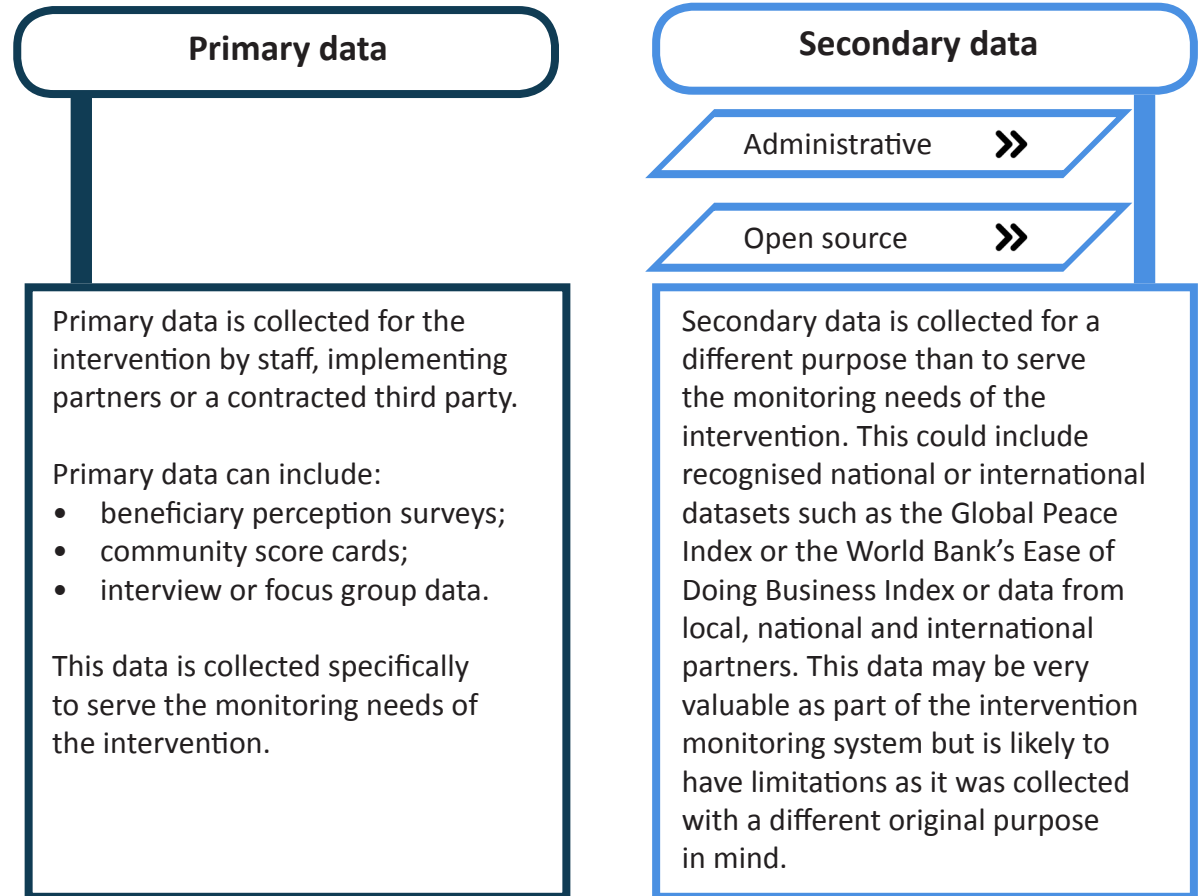
## Results framework process

### Step 3 Identify the data sources

Data sources can include:

- primary data;
- secondary data.

 **Click on the diagram buttons on the far right to find out more**





Theory of change | **Monitoring** | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

**Step by step guide to developing a results framework**

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Intervention management

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > **Step 3** > Step 4 > Step 5

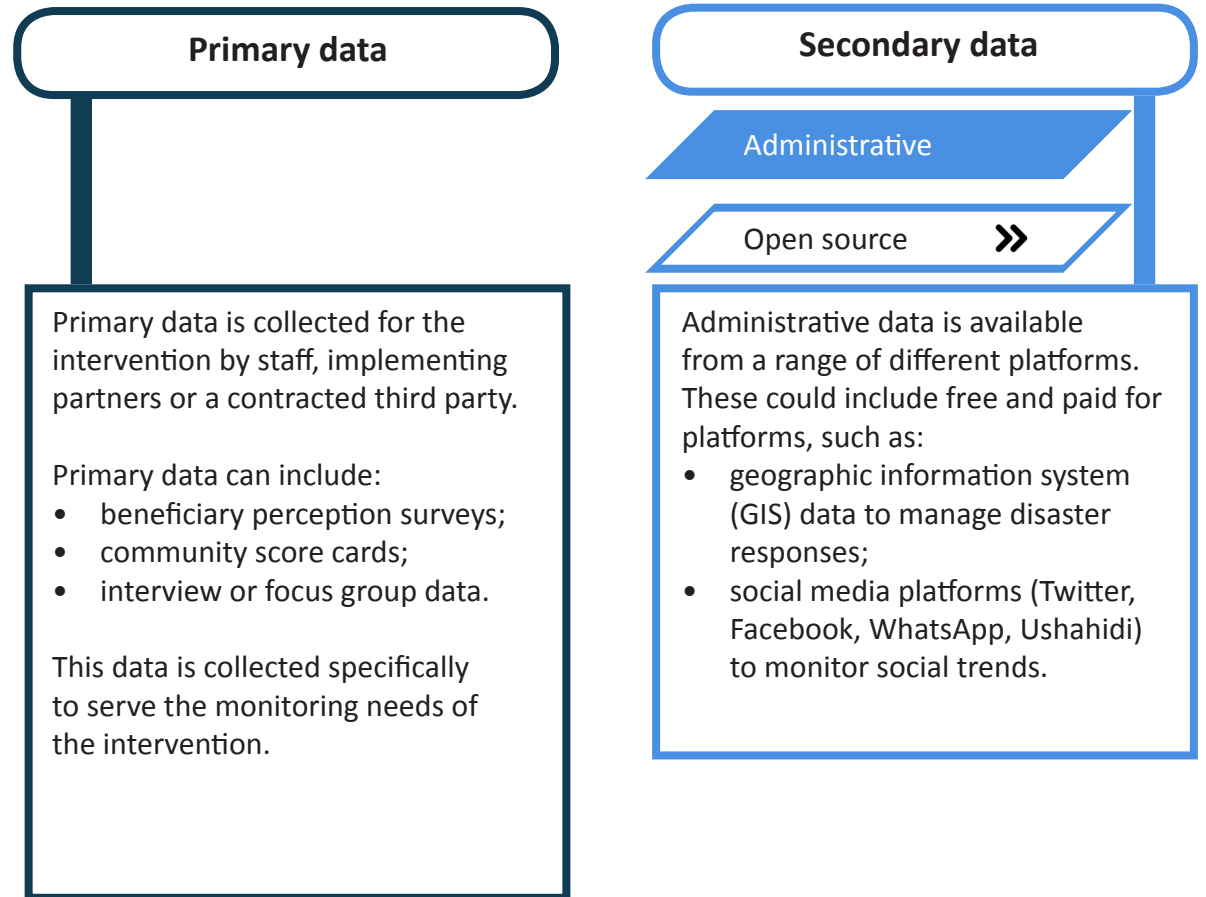
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Theory of change | **Monitoring** | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

**Step by step guide to developing a results framework**

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Intervention management

Tips and tools

Further reading


Step 1 > Step 2 > **Step 3** > Step 4 > Step 5

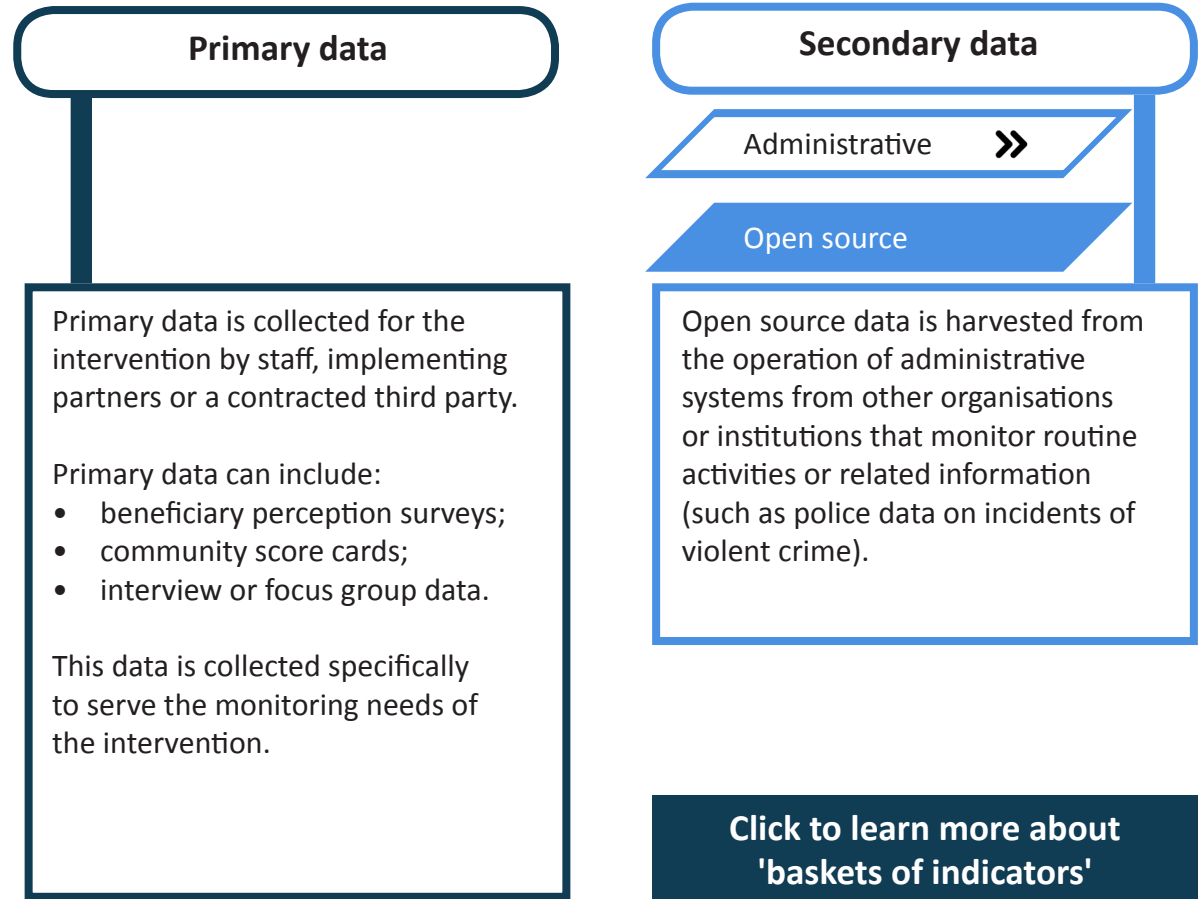
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Theory of change | **Monitoring** | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

**Step by step guide to developing a results framework**

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Intervention management

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > **Step 3** > Step 4 > Step 5

## Results framework process

### Step 3 Identify the data sources

In cases where it is challenging to develop a single indicator, or identify a single data source, to measure progress towards an outcome, **'baskets' of indicators** may offer a solution (OECD, 2011).

These indicators may be grouped around similar themes, use multiple data types, or aim to triangulate elements of desired change, such as national-level economic growth with perceptions of government legitimacy for an intervention that aims to enhance stability through promoting economic opportunity.



Theory of change | **Monitoring** | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

**Step by step guide to developing a results framework**

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Intervention management

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > **Step 4** > Step 5

## Results framework process

### Step 4 Set a baseline, milestones and a target for each indicator

Baselines, milestones and targets establish the starting point and pace at which the desired change is expected to be achieved.

 **Click on the tabs below to find out more**



**TOP TIP:** Invest in establishing a baseline at the outset. With no baseline, monitoring progress and evaluating the intervention’s contribution to change is difficult. Reconstructing baselines for evaluative purposes is costly and rarely possible to do particularly in conflict-affected settings.

**Baseline**

**Milestone**

**Target**



Theory of change | **Monitoring** | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

**Step by step guide to developing a results framework**

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Intervention management

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > **Step 4** > Step 5

## Results framework process

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### Baseline

*Baselines* set the starting point from which progress towards a result may be measured.

### Milestone

### Target



Theory of change | **Monitoring** | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

**Step by step guide to developing a results framework**

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Intervention management

Tips and tools

Further reading


Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > **Step 4** > Step 5

## Results framework process

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### Baseline

*Baselines* set the starting point from which progress towards a result may be measured.

### Milestone

*Milestones* provide intermediary goal-posts, set at intervals (monthly, quarterly, bi-annually, annually, etc.) relevant and appropriate to an intervention’s timeline.

### Target



[Theory of change](#) | [Monitoring](#) | [Evaluation](#) | [Learning](#)

[Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?](#)

[Step by step guide to developing a results framework](#)

[Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity](#)

[Intervention management](#)

[Tips and tools](#)

[Further reading](#)

[Step 1](#) > [Step 2](#) > [Step 3](#) > **[Step 4](#)** > [Step 5](#)

## Results framework process

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 **Click on the tabs below to find out more**



**TOP TIP:** Invest in establishing a baseline at the outset. With no baseline, monitoring progress and evaluating the intervention’s contribution to change is difficult. Reconstructing baselines for evaluative purposes is costly and rarely possible to do particularly in conflict-affected settings.

### Baseline

**Baselines** set the starting point from which progress towards a result may be measured.

### Milestone

**Milestones** provide intermediary goal-posts, set at intervals (monthly, quarterly, bi-annually, annually, etc.) relevant and appropriate to an intervention’s timeline.

### Target

**Targets** are the end-goal, to be achieved by the end of the implementation period. The target reflects an intervention’s cumulative achievements.

[Click to learn more about results frameworks for flexible and adaptive programming](#)



Theory of change | **Monitoring** | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

**Step by step guide to developing a results framework**

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Intervention management

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > **Step 4** > Step 5

## Results framework process

### Step 4 Set a baseline, milestones and a target for each indicator

#### Box 8: Results frameworks for flexible and adaptive programming

In conflict and stabilisation interventions it can be difficult to set concrete milestones and targets in advance. The pathway to achieving change is not always clear and the context can shift rapidly due to conflict dynamics, quickly leaving milestones and targets defunct.

Deliberately taking a more adaptive and flexible approach in the results framework can help to mitigate this, while still providing sufficient rigour when assessing progress.

#### Example: The State Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI), Nigeria

SAVI was a DFID-Nigeria funded empowerment and accountability programme working with citizens, civil society groups, the media and government, helping them to all play their parts in supporting more responsive, inclusive and accountable state governance.

The programme team needed an M&E approach that *‘would meet donor planning and reporting requirements, while enabling reporting of results that derived from learning by doing, and planning which was flexible and adaptive to the local political economy context’*.

The results framework included bedrock impact level indicators that remained constant throughout the programme, providing continuity and clarity of overall direction. There was more flexibility at the lower levels. This allowed the programme to adapt to emerging opportunities and change course when some initiatives did not work as expected.

See Derbyshire, H., Barr, J., Fraser, S. and Mwamba, W. (2016) [Moving Targets, Widening Nets: monitoring incremental and adaptive change in an empowerment and accountability programme](#). DFID Nigeria Briefing Paper. Accountability programme.



## Results framework process

### Step 5 Identify risks and assumptions

The results framework should record **critical assumptions and risks**.

Critical assumptions are those that **must** hold true to realise the result. Likewise, critical risks are those that have the potential to derail the intervention if they occur.

Risks, recorded as high, medium or low, should relate to a robust risk analysis (though not all risks will be included in the results framework).



**TOP TIP:** For UK Government interventions, risk analysis and a living *risk register* are key components of the management approach. The risk register is part of the intervention monitoring and wider MEL system.

For each output and outcome, critical assumptions related to external factors that could carry risk should be noted (for example, political environment, economy, conflict, etc.).

In each case monitoring should be undertaken and risk mitigation measures or contingency plans put in place.





## Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

**The results framework must be conflict-sensitive and gender-sensitive.** It must ensure that an intervention is systematically monitoring these components and that the intervention does not cause harm or exacerbate inequalities.

Some of these indicators may be captured in the body of the results framework, while others will sit as risks and assumptions which also need to be carefully monitored.

 Click on the tabs to find out what should be monitored

**Conflict sensitivity: what to monitor**

**Gender sensitivity: what to monitor**



## Conflict sensitivity: what to monitor

## Gender sensitivity: what to monitor

**Disaggregated indicators:** when the distribution of benefits accrues to a particular group(s) this can aggravate tensions. Tracking the distribution of benefits across men/women is a requirement for all UK government interventions. [Conflict analysis](#) will help determine other identity groups to be disaggregated as part of the monitoring approach.

Indicators relating to **conflict context, conflict/instability drivers** (these will also sit in the risk register): monitoring these indicators will allow an assessment of how the conflict/instability driver is evolving and inform discussion on the continued relevance/appropriateness of the intervention.

**Stabilisation and peace-building outcomes:** monitoring these indicators will help to build understanding of the intervention's positive contribution and/or whether the intervention is inadvertently undermining peace or stability.

**Conflict interaction indicators:** these could include the effects of the conflict on the intervention (e.g. inability to operate) and effects of the intervention on the conflict (e.g. the role of the intervention in mitigating or minimising a conflict driver).

**Conflict sensitivity risks:** should also be identified, monitored and regularly reviewed through the risk register.



## Conflict sensitivity: what to monitor

## Gender sensitivity: what to monitor

**Sex disaggregated indicators:** disaggregation of indicators ensures that differences and inequalities become visible and that this understanding informs our response. It may also be necessary to disaggregate by other variables such as age and (dis)ability.

Balance **quantitative and qualitative indicators:** changes in gender dynamics can be hard to quantify meaningfully. Qualitative indicators may be needed to monitor change meaningfully (for example around women’s meaningful participation in peace processes).

Include indicators which track **gender equality change(s)** that the intervention is contributing to. This should be proportionate to the activities planned. For example, if an intervention is supporting women’s input to the development of a national strategy, indicators should track the extent to which this input is reflected in the final strategy.

Identify **risks that relate to gender dynamics** that need to be monitored and mitigated. For example, what are the different barriers women, men, girls and boys may face in participating in activities?

Identify risks that relate to the intervention entrenching **gender inequalities** that need to be monitored and mitigated. For example, in working with traditional and religious leaders, is there a risk of reinforcing harmful norms in their messaging?



## Intervention management

As well as being a key tool to conduct regular monitoring of an intervention, within HMG, the results framework is also central to the management approach and may be used for:

- **annual reviews** – the results framework is the basis for measuring progress at key milestones, comparing achieved results against those planned and addressing questions in relation to value for money;
- **completion reports** – on completion of an intervention, the results framework is used to measure overall performance by comparing planned and achieved results;
- **evaluation** – if there is a decision to evaluate, the results framework is a key tool and data source. It is also useful for identifying lessons about what has worked and not worked, ensuring transparency and accountability.



**TOP TIP:** Results frameworks should be reviewed and updated regularly. This should happen at least quarterly but may need to be done even more frequently in conflict and stabilisation settings where contexts can change rapidly and progress is much more difficult to achieve.



Theory of change | **Monitoring** | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a results framework

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Intervention management

**Tips and tools**

Further reading

**When planning to develop or refresh a results framework remember:**

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	A strong ToC is the <b>foundation</b> of a strong results framework.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Indicators are <b>inevitable approximations</b> (MQ Patton, 2008). They vary in validity and reliability. It is important to understand the limitations of the indicators we are monitoring.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Results frameworks should be <b>dynamic and changeable</b> . They should be reviewed regularly in order to be useful. Document all changes clearly.

**Click to view the Results Framework Quality Assurance Checklist**



Theory of change | **Monitoring** | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing a results framework

Ensuring conflict and gender sensitivity

Intervention management

**Tips and tools**

Further reading

Results Framework Quality Assurance Checklist	Y/N
Is the results framework consistent with the theory of change?	
Are all indicators relevant to the results chain? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Do impact indicators measure <b>long term goals</b> to which the intervention <b>contributes</b>?</li> <li>· Do outcome indicators measure <b>what will change</b> and who will <b>benefit</b>?</li> <li>· Do output indicators measure tangible things <b>delivered by the intervention</b>?</li> </ul>	
Are all indicators SMART? Are qualitative indicators used where appropriate?	
Have standard/good practice indicators/learning from other projects been considered?	
Are baselines included for all indicators? Are targets/milestones realistic?	
Is the source information clear and based on robust data sources? Is it clear who will collect and report?	
Is the results framework conflict-sensitive and gender-sensitive?	



Theory of change | **Monitoring** | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict  
and stabilisation setting?

Step by step guide to developing  
a results framework

Ensuring conflict and  
gender sensitivity

Intervention  
management

Tips and  
tools

**Further  
reading**

## For practical support, good practice and real-life examples to help in **developing a results framework**:

1. Chattopadhyay, S. (2019) [“The logframe in an ‘iterative & adaptive’ world”](#). Blog post available online from the World Bank.
2. Church, C. and Rogers, M. (2006) [Designing for Results: integrating monitoring and evaluation in conflict transformation programs](#). Search for Common Ground [Chapters 4-6]
3. Corlazzoli, V. and White, J. (2013) [Back to Basics: a compilation of best practices in design, monitoring and evaluation in fragile and conflict-affected environments](#). Search for Common Ground.
4. Derbyshire, H., Barr, J., Fraser, S. and Mwamba, W. (2016) [Moving Targets, Widening Nets: monitoring incremental and adaptive change in an empowerment and accountability programme](#). DFID Nigeria Briefing Paper. Accountability programme.
5. Gender and Development Journal (2014) [Edition on Gender, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning](#), Vol. 22, No. 2.
6. Michie, S., Stralen, M.v.S. and West, R. (2011) [The behaviour change wheel: A new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions](#). *Implementation Science*, Vol. 6, No. 42, pp. 1-12.
7. UNDP (2009) [Handbook on Planning, Monitoring and Evaluating for Development Results](#). [Chapter 2]



Theory of change | Monitoring | **Evaluation** | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

When and what to evaluate?

Step by step guide: the foundations for useful evaluation

Tips and tools

Further reading

**EVALUATION** is the systematic and objective assessment of an intervention with the aim of determining its relevance and fulfilment of objectives, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability.

Source: OECD (2002) pp. 21-22

Evaluation provides a rigorous, independent assessment of an intervention's effectiveness in achieving or contributing to its desired results.

This is different from monitoring which provides ongoing data for indicators of progress.

**Box 9: Evaluation vs review**

There is often confusion between evaluations and reviews. In contrast to an evaluation, a review might be undertaken by people involved in the design, implementation or management of the intervention. Though there is often overlap, evaluations aim to answer different questions and produce different results to that of reviews.

Reviews, particularly annual reviews, serve more of a monitoring function and often focus heavily on operational issues. They do not have the same standards of independence, transparency and robust methodological approach that characterise evaluations.

[Click to view the key features of an evaluation](#)





## Key features of an evaluation

**Independence:** an evaluation should be independent (i.e. led by those with no other involvement in the intervention, often externally contracted organisations/ individuals) in order to prevent bias.

**Transparency:** where possible, evaluation reports should be published with a view to being accountable and sharing lessons learned publicly.

**Methodology:** an evaluation asks why and how things work, including investigating the intervention theory and assumptions, and looking for unintended effects. To do this an evaluation requires a robust methodology and should use internationally-agreed evaluation criteria as appropriate.

**OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC):** identifies five general evaluation criteria: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability. Additional criteria that may be useful are coverage, coherence and coordination.



## Why is evaluation useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

**Understanding *what works*** in reducing conflict, supporting stability and promoting sustainable peace is an important challenge to those seeking to assist in situations of conflict. Evaluation can help to both prove and improve our work.

Evaluation has two main purposes:

- **accountability** - evaluation critically assesses whether an intervention achieved the intended results with an effective use of resources;
- **learning** - evaluation helps to determine not only if it an intervention has achieved results, but *why, how, and to what extent* it has done so. This supports adaptation and improvement to ongoing or future interventions.



## When and what to evaluate?

Whether fulfilling accountability or learning functions, an evaluation **should be utilisation-focused and action-oriented**. An evaluation that is not utilised as an opportunity to learn, improve or enhance our understanding of an intervention is a lost opportunity. **Focusing on utility from the outset** will help promote the evaluation's use and will shape its design (Patton, 2012).

**Thinking about evaluation early in the intervention lifecycle is key.** Some evaluation designs require data to be collected up-front, to get an understanding of the pre-intervention baseline. If this is not planned and budgeted, it will be too late and will limit the evaluation options available.

**It is acceptable not to evaluate.** In reality we do not have the resources, nor is it proportionate, to evaluate everything. This is particularly the case in conflict and stabilisation settings where evaluation is an intervention in itself (i.e. it will interact with the conflict and gender dynamics of the context and needs to be sensitive to this).

If you are struggling to decide whether an evaluation is required, an **evaluability assessment** may help. Evaluability assessments can help decide whether an evaluation is feasible and also help to shape its questions and design.

### Box 10: Questions to ask on whether, or not, to evaluate

- Does the strategic importance of the intervention merit an evaluation?
- Are there gaps in the evidence base underpinning the intervention design?
- Is the intervention approach novel/innovative with the intention to scale-up in the future?
- Is the intervention particularly large, risky or innovative?
- Is there demand for an evaluation and will its findings be used to inform decisions?
- Is it possible to evaluate the intervention? Consider an evaluability assessment



Theory of change | Monitoring | **Evaluation** | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

When and what to evaluate?

**Step by step guide: the foundations for useful evaluation**

Tips and tools

Further reading

**Step 1** > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4

## The foundations for useful evaluation

### Step 1 Frame the evaluation

When the decision to evaluate has been made, the five questions on the right will help to frame the evaluation:

 **Click on the tabs on the right to expand the questions**

**Question 1: What is the purpose of the evaluation?**

**Question 2: Who are the stakeholders?**

**Question 3: When to evaluate?**

**Question 4: What to evaluate?**

**Using OECD-DAC criteria to frame evaluation questions**



## The foundations for useful evaluation

### Step 1 Frame the evaluation

Question 1 What is the purpose of the evaluation?

It is important to **determine the purpose of the evaluation**; why there is a requirement for it, the practical purpose it will serve and why it needs to be undertaken at a particular point.

The purpose will affect the timing of the evaluation and the questions asked.

Evaluations may be used for one or more purposes:

- to design or validate a development strategy;
- to make mid-course corrections to an intervention;
- to improve intervention design and implementation;
- to ensure accountability;
- to make funding decisions;
- to fill gaps in the evidence base on specific intervention areas;
- to increase knowledge and understanding of the benefits and challenges of the intervention.

[←](#) Back to the framing evaluation questions



## The foundations for useful evaluation

### Step 1 Frame the evaluation

Question 2 Who are the stakeholders?

It is important to know who will use the evaluation. Start by identifying which individuals and/or groups will be affected by the evaluation and will have the strongest incentives to engage with the process and findings to inform their decisions or actions. These people are the evaluation's primary stakeholders. Effective early engagement with this group should ensure their needs are met.

In addition to the primary stakeholders there will often be a wider audience for an evaluation. The wider audience may need to view and react to the evaluation.

Establishing the priorities and information needs of all stakeholders will help in determining the timing, focus, and scope of the evaluation.



**TOP TIP:** Clearly identifying users and the wider audience can help to eliminate unnecessary data collection, reduce evaluation cost and time, and ensure the evaluation is focused on the correct objectives.

[Back to the framing evaluation questions](#)



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

When and what to evaluate?

Step by step guide: the foundations for useful evaluation

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4

## The foundations for useful evaluation

### Step 1 Frame the evaluation

Question 3 When to evaluate?

There is no one answer for when an evaluation should take place. The appropriate timing depends on the context, purpose and stakeholder needs. However, timing is an important aspect to get right; a good evaluation which does not deliver in time to inform the decisions it was commissioned for will be of little use.

Evaluations need to be synchronised with relevant project, programme, policy and/or spending cycles, as well as national partner policy and political cycles, to maximise utility and influence. Evaluation can happen during or at the end of an intervention’s implementation.

#### Box 11: Evaluation timing

Formative (ex-ante, mid-term) evaluations take place during the intervention lifecycle to inform/improve the implementation and outcomes of an ongoing intervention, inform decisions about future funding, or assess whether a pilot has been effective enough to scale up.

Summative (final, ex-post) evaluations take place at the end of the intervention to assess impact or effects. In some cases, and particularly in the conflict and stabilisation space, the impacts of an intervention may take significant time to become apparent. It is important to consider this when deciding when to evaluate as a poorly timed evaluation will draw incorrect conclusions about effect if it tries to measure impact too early.

[Back to the framing evaluation questions](#)



## The foundations for useful evaluation

### Step 1 Frame the evaluation

#### Question 4 What to evaluate?

Determining what to evaluate relates to the scope of an evaluation, how much of an intervention is included, and what the focus of the evaluation will be (e.g. on changes in the lives of beneficiaries, or organisational factors around management and implementation). **Evaluation questions** determine the type of information that the evaluation will gather.

When developing evaluation questions, consider:

- **The theory of change:** An evaluation can test critical assumptions in the ToC and whether they are holding true in the context and implementation experience, or whether particular outputs are leading to desired outcomes. It is critical that the ToC has been well developed and accurately reflects the intervention’s design and implementation. This may mean updating the ToC if changes have occurred.
- **Recognised evaluation criteria:** A number of standards and guidelines exist to help frame evaluation questions. The OECD-DAC criteria are the most widely used. Not every evaluation is expected to incorporate all the criteria; some may not be relevant or appropriate. For example, questions of sustainability and impact may be premature for a mid-term evaluation.

[← Back to the framing evaluation questions](#)





Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

When and what to evaluate?

Step by step guide: the foundations for useful evaluation

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4

## The foundations for useful evaluation

### Step 1 Frame the evaluation

Using OECD-DAC criteria to frame evaluation questions

<b>Relevance</b>	Are we doing the right thing?
<b>Efficiency</b>	Are we making best use of resources?
<b>Effectiveness</b>	Are we achieving what we said we would achieve?
<b>Impact</b>	Are we making a difference? Positive and negative changes, direct and indirect, intended and unintended.
<b>Sustainability</b>	Are the benefits of the intervention likely to continue over the long-term once the intervention has ended?
<b>Coherence and coordination</b>	Was the intervention consistent with the wider policy context? Was it coordinated with other actors?
Plus gender and conflict sensitivity should be embedded throughout.	

Adapted from OECD (1991)



Back to the framing evaluation questions



## The foundations for useful evaluation

### Step 2 Select the appropriate evaluation type

The OECD-DAC identifies around 20 generic evaluation types.

These evaluation types may relate to:

- the **stage** at which an evaluation takes place (e.g. ex-ante, ex-post);
- its **purpose** (e.g. formative, summative);
- aspects of the **approach** (e.g. process, impact, participatory).

These evaluation types are defined in [OECD-DAC's useful glossary of terms](#). An evaluation may be classified in more than one way. Each of the types are potentially valid approaches.

Within HMG, the most common evaluation types are:

**Impact evaluations** to test the outcomes/impacts an intervention was intended to achieve in a way that allows any change identified to be *attributed* directly to the intervention.

**Performance evaluations** to assess the extent to which a given intervention is seen to have *contributed* to outcomes/impacts in its specific context. This key difference between *attribution* and *contribution* is discussed in [Step 3](#).

**Process evaluations** to ask how and why an intervention has been implemented and to assess under what conditions an intervention might work. Process evaluations are important for assessing implementation of programmes and looking at policy delivery.

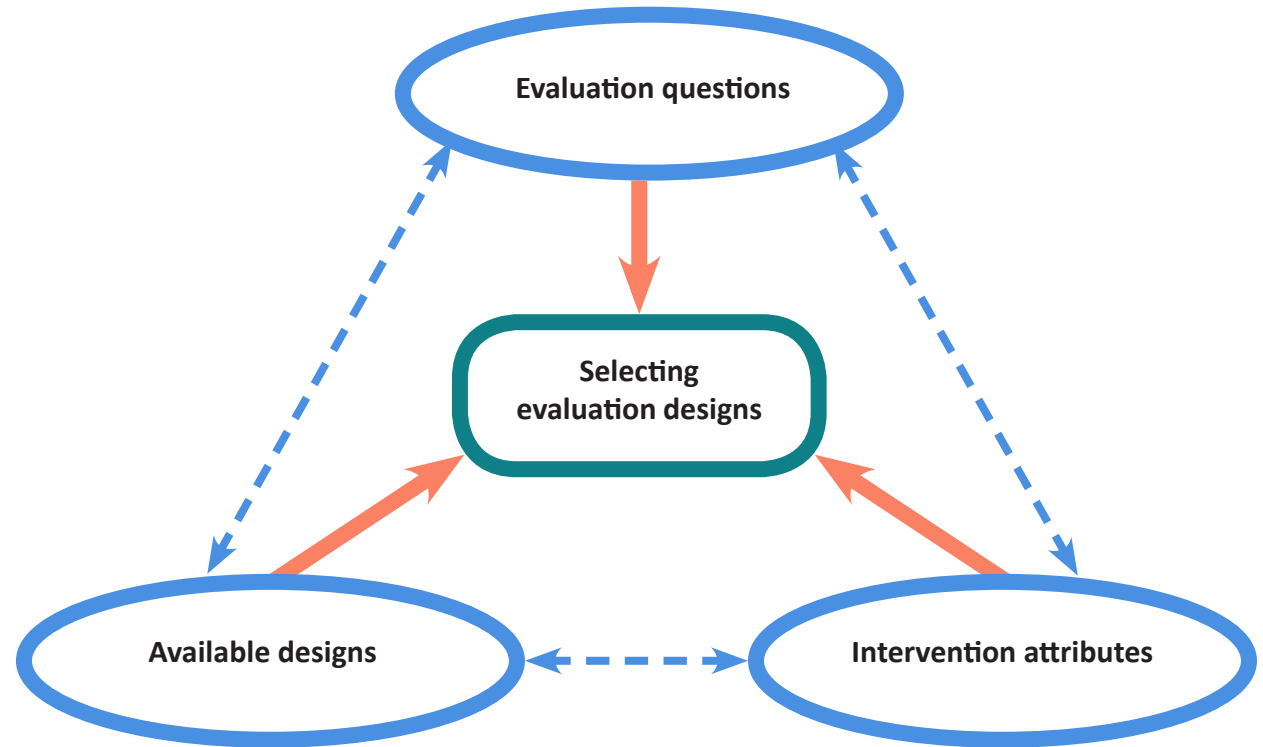


## The foundations for useful evaluation

### Step 3 Select the appropriate evaluation design

The design provides the overarching framework for the evaluation. A clear set of evaluation questions, informed by an understanding of the evaluation purpose and user needs, are fundamental. It is important that these factors drive an evaluation’s design rather than the other way around, although practical considerations including timescales, data availability and budget will also inform the range of designs that are suitable.

### Selecting evaluation designs diagram



Adapted from Stern *et al.* (2012)



## The foundations for useful evaluation

### Step 3 Select the appropriate evaluation design

#### Establishing attribution

A key consideration for any evaluation, particularly relevant to those in complex conflict and stabilisation settings, is whether it will be possible to credibly attribute observable changes to an intervention, provide alternative forms of attribution (Peersman *et al.*, 2016), or only state a programme's *contribution* to changes (Mayne, 2008).

If the purpose of the evaluation is to establish attribution then the ideal design would compare two groups that are identical in every way, except that one has been exposed to the intervention and the other has not. **This scenario fulfils two important criteria:**

**Criteria 1:** A counterfactual which shows what would have happened without the intervention, allowing for any other changes taking place over the time period of the intervention to be accounted for.

**Criteria 2:** Because the groups are identical in every respect but the intervention, it is possible to attribute any changes identified in the group(s) receiving the intervention, to that intervention.



## The foundations for useful evaluation

### Step 3 Select the appropriate evaluation design

There are a range of designs that fulfil these criteria, through either:

- **experimental design** (randomised control trials, natural experiments) or;
- **statistical techniques** to mimic an experimental design (quasi-experimental designs).

For practical and ethical reasons, these approaches are often unsuited to evaluation in conflict and stabilisation settings.

Furthermore, these designs are not best suited to tell the full story of our intervention.

While they give a robust estimate of *what* an intervention has achieved, they often do not tell us *why* or *how* this is the case.

**Evaluation designs that place the [theory of change](#) underpinning an intervention at the centre (theory-based evaluations) are more likely to be suitable in the conflict and stabilisation space.**

Again, there are a number of *theory-based* designs that can be used to determine/infer causality, or establish an intervention's *contribution* to an observable change.

**Theory-based designs assess how effectively an intervention's theory of change holds true.** By understanding how an intervention intends to achieve specified results, a theory-based evaluation assesses whether the activities did indeed lead to the desired results, whether the underlying assumptions held true, and factors that did or did not contribute to change.



Theory of change | Monitoring | **Evaluation** | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

When and what to evaluate?

**Step by step guide: the foundations for useful evaluation**

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > **Step 3** > Step 4

## The foundations for useful evaluation

### Step 3 Select the appropriate evaluation design



#### **TOP TIP: Bring in the experts!**

You do not need to be an expert in evaluation design to commission an evaluation. If you can define clear questions and objectives, you can rely on evaluation consultants or internal advisory support to help with design and methodological questions.



Theory of change | Monitoring | **Evaluation** | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

When and what to evaluate?

**Step by step guide: the foundations for useful evaluation**

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > **Step 4**

## The foundations for useful evaluation

### Step 4 Select the appropriate evaluation methods

Evaluation design is the overall approach to conducting the evaluation. Evaluation methods are the specific tools and approaches for collecting and analysing data. In some cases a design may be closely linked with a set of methods. Evaluation methodologies are similar to those of standard social science, drawing on qualitative, quantitative and mixed method techniques.

#### Box 12: Evaluation methods

**Quantitative:** Quantitative methods utilise numerical data to obtain information about the world. Quantitative methods count, classify and may construct statistical models in an attempt to explain what is observed.

**Qualitative:** Qualitative methods attempt to present the social world, and perspectives on that world, in terms of the concepts, behaviours, perceptions and accounts of the people who inhabit it.

**Mixed methods:** In many evaluations it makes sense to use a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. In terms of sequencing there are various options. Sometimes it is useful to conduct qualitative work in advance of a quantitative survey to identify the most pertinent questions to ask. In other cases a quantitative survey may reveal findings that are not easily explained, and qualitative work can be used to try and unpack the findings.



## The foundations for useful evaluation

### Step 4 Select the appropriate evaluation methods

Evaluation methods represent an extensive field of practice, far beyond the scope of this guide.

This guidance provides selected examples of theory-based methods that may be suited to conflict and stabilisation settings because of their flexibility and inherent use of mixed-data collection methods to strengthen their credibility.

**Process mapping** or **tracing** aims to evaluate cause-and-effect links within an intervention's theory of change. A variety of data collection tools can be used, tailored to the specific context or intervention needs. The concept of process tracing is that, by tracing successful steps along a process, if each step occurs with its assumptions holding true, then it can be reasonably assumed that the desired result will be achieved. In this way, process tracing infers causality for an intervention's effect (Bennet, 2010; Collier, 2011) [Read more](#)

**Contribution analysis** uses a six-step process to explore the theory of change. It involves gathering evidence to develop a contribution story that critically assesses the contribution of the intervention to an observed change, relative to other contributing factors. The story is revised through an iterative process (Mayne, 2001; 2008; 2012) [Read more](#)

**Outcome mapping** is an approach to planning, monitoring and evaluating social change initiatives that steers teams through an iterative process to identify their desired change and work collaboratively to bring it about. It is well-suited to interventions focused on building capacity, exerting influence, or when a deep understanding of social factors is necessary (Earl *et al.*, 2001; Smutylo, 2005; Jones and Hearn, 2009; Tusi and Lucas, 2013). Outcomes are conceptualised in terms of behaviour changes. [Read more](#)





Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

When and what to evaluate?

Step by step guide: the foundations for useful evaluation

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4

## The foundations for useful evaluation

### Step 4 Select the appropriate evaluation methods

Not all evaluative activities need to entail the hefty methodological rigour and cost of a full-scale impact evaluation.

Different forms of ad hoc or bespoke research activities can be used to address specific questions, areas of uncertainty or test aspects of an intervention’s [theory of change](#).

Evaluative thinking can also be built into intervention monitoring or can inform reviews.

#### Box 13: Evaluative monitoring

**Evaluative monitoring** balances the need for ongoing data collection to monitor progress, while doing so in a way that asks critical questions around effectiveness and relevance. An example of evaluative monitoring is the adapted form of outcome harvesting (OH) developed by Saferworld. This approach allowed the organisation to shift from quantitative output-oriented monitoring to more qualitative outcome-oriented monitoring.

Outcome harvesting is described as ‘an evaluation approach...[that] doesn’t start with predetermined outcomes...but rather collects evidence of what has been achieved and works backwards to determine whether and how the intervention contributed to the change’ (Saferworld, 2016, p.3) [Read more](#)

In conflict and stabilisation contexts **third party monitoring (TPM)** - which is often done for the purpose of ensuring accountability by monitoring delivery of outputs in areas where staff cannot travel - can also serve evaluative purposes.

There are several examples in the UK Conflict, Security and Stability Fund (CSSF), which show where TPM has extended its focus to capture outcome level information to feed an independent evaluation.



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | Learning

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

When and what to evaluate?

Step by step guide: the foundations for useful evaluation

Tips and tools

Further reading

### When planning an evaluation remember:

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Understanding the <b>needs of stakeholders</b> who will use the evaluation is key to ensure the findings and recommendations are ultimately useful.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Consider <b>commissioning an evaluability assessment</b> if you are unsure about whether an evaluation is feasible or necessary.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Evaluation design and methodology should be <b>informed by the evaluation questions</b> , rather than the other way around.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Ask the experts</b> – M&E advisers will be able to advise on all aspects of evaluation planning, design, commissioning and management.



[Theory of change](#) | [Monitoring](#) | [Evaluation](#) | [Learning](#)

[Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?](#)

[When and what to evaluate?](#)

[Step by step guide: the foundations for useful evaluation](#)

[Tips and tools](#)

[Further reading](#)

## For more information on **evaluation design**:

1. HM Treasury (2011) *The Magenta Book: Guidance for Evaluation*.
2. Bamberger, M., Rugh, J. and Mabry, L. (2012) *RealWorld Evaluation: working under budget, time, data, and political constraints*. SAGE Publications.
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5. Davies, R. (2013) [Planning Evaluability Assessments: A synthesis of the literature with recommendations](#). Department for International development.
6. Mayne, J. (2008) [Contribution analysis: an approach to exploring cause and effect](#). Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) Brief 16.
7. Stern, E., Stame, N., Mayne, J., Forss, K., Davies, R. and Befani, B. (2012) [Broadening the Range of Designs and Methods for Impact Evaluations](#). Department for International Development. Working Paper 38.
8. Saferworld (2016) [Doing Things Differently: rethinking monitoring and evaluation to understand change](#). Saferworld Learning Paper.
9. Smutylo, T. (2005) [Outcome mapping: a method for tracking behavioural changes in development programs](#). Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) Brief 7.



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | **Learning**

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step mechanisms to support learning

Tips and tools

Further reading

**LESSONS LEARNED** are generalisations based on evaluation experiences that abstract from the specific circumstances to broader situations. Frequently, lessons highlight strengths or weaknesses in preparation, design, and implementation that affect an intervention’s performance, outcome and impact.

Source: OECD (2002) p.25

Monitoring and evaluation data has little value if it is not acted upon.

Indeed, the *value* of a monitoring and evaluation exercise can be determined by the degree to which the information is used by intended decision makers and a wider audience.



## Why is learning useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

As with monitoring and evaluation, learning serves two important purposes:

- **accountability:** learning for accountability seeks a constructive lens in understanding how outcomes were or were not achieved, and why;
- **adaptation:** learning for adaptation means that M&E data utilised within an intervention enables decisions to enhance results and improve effectiveness.

**In politically sensitive, emergent and complex contexts of conflict and stabilisation, both types of learning are necessary.**

Moreover, given the relatively low evidence base regarding *what works* in reducing violent conflict and building lasting peace, there is an obligation for interventions in conflict and stabilisation settings to contribute further to the evidence base.

### Box 14: Why ME&L?

‘... ME&L leads to better programmes, deeper learning and increased accountability, whether to donors or the affected people or communities. ME&L in fragile states needs to be swift, safe and highly practical for making management decisions in often unsafe and difficult-to-access environments...’ (Social Impact, 2006)



## Learning process

### Step 1 Use the theory of change

The [theory of change](#) can support an ongoing **process of critical reflection** – considering both the specific (changing) context, and how an intervention’s rationale and approach fits into this (Valters, 2015, p.6).

In this sense the theory of change is an **anchor-point** to a learning framework. It should be revisited periodically and critically discussed, with changes to context, conflict dynamics, or new evidence that affirms or challenges the assumptions included as necessary.



## Learning process

### Step 2 Set learning questions

Drawing on the [theory of change](#), a set of learning questions should be developed to prioritise learning areas for an intervention.

Questions may focus on:

- assumptions about **causality** in the ToC and whether these assumptions, in the context of the specific intervention, are valid and true;
- aspects of the **context** identified as risks to the effectiveness of the intervention;
- factors that may create unintended **consequences**.



**TOP TIP:** Establishing clear learning questions early on will ensure direction and meaning for subsequent monitoring, evaluation and learning activities.



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | **Learning**

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

**Step by step mechanisms to support learning**

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > **Step 3** > Step 4 > Step 5

## Learning process

### Step 3 Develop a monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) plan

A MEL plan sets out the approach to answering the [learning questions](#), drawing on the intervention's range of [monitoring](#), [evaluation](#) and [learning](#) activities.

The plan should show **who** is intended to learn, **when** and **how** learning will happen.

#### Box 15: Data that may inform the MEL plan

**Research:** context-related research, conflict analysis, gender analysis and ad hoc intervention-specific research.

**Mapping:** mapping of other donor interventions, and stakeholder mapping (completed as part of the [theory of change](#) development)

**Monitoring data:** results framework indicators (including conflict and gender sensitivity indicators) and contextual monitoring addressing the learning questions.

**Reviews and evaluations:** assess aspects of programme delivery, thematic reviews or evaluations.





Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | **Learning**

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

**Step by step mechanisms to support learning**

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > **Step 4** > Step 5

## Learning process

### Step 4 Feedback loops

**Feedback loops provide a mechanism for systematically incorporating learning back into an intervention;** *closing the loop* between the findings generated by monitoring and evaluation activities, and strategic decisions about an intervention’s design and management.

**Moving beyond internal reflection** within our own teams is strongly encouraged as this can help surface our operating assumptions, underlying values, and biases, and promote reflection on our working practices, moving towards what can be termed ‘double loop’ learning (Argyris, 1976).

**Periodic reflection sessions** amongst team members to discuss findings from MEL system outputs (evaluation reports, annual reviews, research studies, etc.)

**Regular working groups** involving external stakeholders around thematic priority areas to widen inputs into technical topics.

**Intervention-specific fora** involving other agencies implementing similar interventions. This can encourage shared knowledge, experience and opportunities for collaboration.

**A process to respond to and make changes** to an intervention following a review or evaluation.



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | **Learning**

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

**Step by step mechanisms to support learning**

Tips and tools

Further reading

Step 1 > Step 2 > Step 3 > Step 4 > **Step 5**

## Learning process

### Step 5 Responding to learning

**Learning from MEL system data is the first step towards its full utilisation; the second is responding to the implications of this learning.**

While adaptive management has increased in prominence across the spectrum of development assistance, adaptation is particularly pertinent in conflict and stabilisation settings.

To keep pace and add value, MEL systems need to be as dynamic as the operating environment.

In this way the MEL system can help teams to learn, adapt and re-prioritise in real time.

#### Box 16: Strategy Testing for Adaptive Management

The Asia Foundation developed **Strategy Testing (ST) as an approach to monitoring interventions addressing complex problems** through iterative and adaptive approaches. The complex problems are often highly politicised and challenge prevailing power structures.

ST requires teams to continually assess the probability of achieving success as they process new information and refine their strategies.

The approach uses four simple steps to **review new information and update** the theory of change:

1. review what has happened **since the ToC was drafted**, including major events, changes in the political context, accomplishments, setbacks etc., and create a 'timeline' for recording these evolving dynamics;
2. review the ToC through a **structured discussion** that takes into account changes to the context, actor dynamics etc., to re-establish if the current approach is still appropriate;
3. revise the ToC to **reflect any changes** to the overarching strategy or tactics;
4. identify any programmatic, operational or budgetary **implications of changes**, keeping formal records of each step for accountability and transparency purposes (Ladner, 2015).

[Read more about strategy testing](#)



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | **Learning**

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step mechanisms to support learning

**Tips and tools**

Further reading

### When planning for learning remember:

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Set a <b>clear vision</b> and direction for the learning agenda.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Make time for <b>review and reflection</b> .
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Seek an <b>external perspective</b> to avoid tunnel vision and to learn from others.



Theory of change | Monitoring | Evaluation | **Learning**

Why is it useful in a conflict and stabilisation setting?

Step by step mechanisms to support learning

Tips and tools

**Further reading**

## Further reading, tools and support on **learning and adaptation**:

1. Ladner, D. (2015) [Strategy Testing: an innovative approach to monitoring highly flexible aid programs](#). Working Politically in Practice Series, Case Study No 3. The Asia Foundation and Australian Aid.
2. Patton, M.Q. (2011) *Developmental Evaluation: applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use*. Guilford Press.
3. Pasanen, T. (2017) [Monitoring and evaluation: five reality checks for adaptive management](#). Insight. Overseas Development Institute.
4. Ramalingam, B. (2006) [Tools for knowledge and learning: A guide for development and humanitarian organisations](#). Research and Policy in Development Programme. Overseas Development Institute.
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6. Valters, C. (2015) [Theories of Change: time for a radical approach to learning in development](#). Overseas Development Institute.
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Proportionality | Data management | Issues of access and influence | Third party monitoring | Technology for MEL | Ethical considerations | Safeguarding | Introducing a gender-sensitive approach | Introducing a conflict-sensitive approach | Tools and support



## Implementing MEL systems in conflict and stabilisation settings

The challenges to effective MEL in conflict and stabilisation settings are well established. When designing and implementing a MEL process keep in mind that there is a higher chance of success with an integrated, politically oriented and led approach that roots external interventions (including MEL interventions) in an understanding of the local, national and international political economy and which uses the UK Government’s Approach to Stabilisation to underpin realistic, iterative, adaptive and sequenced engagements.

In highly complex conflict or post-conflict environments, the risk of some degree of failure will still be high. However, there are practical steps and emerging innovations that can help to maximise the value of the MEL process and assist in overcoming some of the challenges.

This section presents an overview of these steps and innovations.



[Proportionality](#) | [Data management](#) | [Issues of access and influence](#) | [Third party monitoring](#) | [Technology for MEL](#) | [Ethical considerations](#) | [Safeguarding](#) | [Introducing a gender-sensitive approach](#) | [Introducing a conflict-sensitive approach](#) | [Tools and support](#)

## Proportionality

**Proportionality** in terms of budgeting and level of effort, is an important consideration at the outset.

**Budgeting guidelines** for MEL tend to be 5-10% of intervention budgets (with the OECD's recommended 3-5% for evaluation specifically). This may not be enough for interventions in conflict and stabilisation contexts where additional security measures for data collection teams and additional efforts to ensure data security all add to MEL budgets. MEL for adaptive management, where data is informing intervention implementation and adaptation on an ongoing basis, will cost more again. Budget allocations need to be revisited and revised as the costs and extent of MEL activity are defined.

The **level of effort** needed to adequately, yet desirably, monitor, evaluate and learn should also be factored into planning. A constraint to effective MEL in conflict and stabilisation settings may be low levels of capacity amongst implementing or local partners, and/or a lack of access to the ground for staff. In these cases [third-party monitoring](#) may be considered to complement an intervention's internal monitoring processes.



### TOP TIP

Factors to consider when setting MEL budgets include:

- the complexity of the intervention;
- the nature and number of evaluation and learning questions to be answered;
- the quality of data that is available;
- the level of in-country primary data collection required;
- the type of evaluation that is envisaged.



Proportionality | **Data management** | Issues of access and influence | Third party monitoring | Technology for MEL | Ethical considerations | Safeguarding | Introducing a gender-sensitive approach | Introducing a conflict-sensitive approach | Tools and support

### Data management

The **management of data** in conflict and stabilisation settings requires special consideration.

The **form of data** (format and nature) will vary depending on the intervention, its level of complexity and its purpose. Increased complexity requires more robust data management systems.

**Data security** is important in any context, but critical in conflict and stabilisation settings where the loss of personal data or information about implementation or beneficiary groups presents a risk of aggravating conflict.

**Consider carefully who can access data, how it is stored and transmitted.**



Proportionality | Data management | **Issues of access and influence** | Third party monitoring | Technology for MEL | Ethical considerations | Safeguarding | Introducing a gender-sensitive approach | Introducing a conflict-sensitive approach | Tools and support

**INFLUENCE** refers to the action or process intended to directly or indirectly affect the way actors think or behave or the way something happens to achieve [specific] goals.

Source: DFID (2013b) p.1

Interventions in conflict and stabilisation settings are often designed to provide support through indirect rather than direct means.

In these situations, an intermediary actor receives assistance (typically technical assistance or capacity support) and is then responsible for adopting and implementing that assistance for the sake of a wider group of beneficiaries.

An intervention's ability to influence intermediate actors has a bearing on whether the intermediary will in fact use the support as it is intended.

In highly politicised conflict and stabilisation settings, influence plays a role in intervention effectiveness and can also serve broader objectives; such as providing platforms for diplomatic engagement to promote conflict resolution.

But influence should rarely be the end goal in and of itself; it should be a way of achieving the overarching 'goal'.





Proportionality | Data management | **Issues of access and influence** | Third party monitoring | Technology for MEL | Ethical considerations | Safeguarding | Introducing a gender-sensitive approach | Introducing a conflict-sensitive approach | Tools and support

## Issues of access and influence

Interventions that use **influence** as a mechanism to effect change should acknowledge this, monitor and measure its effectiveness. This means that the [theory of change](#) should articulate the points at which influence is expected, and how influence will be used to leverage a desired change. Indicators can then be designed to monitor and assess the intervention's influence.

There are various methods for monitoring and evaluating influence, such as case-based and participatory methods. These methods need to be adapted to the context and intervention in line with what is viable within resource and contextual constraints.



**TOP TIP:** In environments with heightened sensitivities, applying a conflict-sensitive lens to monitoring influence will help avoid unintended negative consequences.

### Box 17: Political access and influence

The UK Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) in East Africa developed the Political Access and Influence (PAI) Framework to assist programmes in reporting their access and influence achievements. Access and influence were previously notable omissions from the Fund's results as they were not identified in formal indicators or targets, were seen to be unpredictable, and were not themselves identified as a final objective (rather a pathway towards achieving a higher objective).

The PAI Framework 'represents a theory of change for political access and influence'. It uses a matrix to align a typology of possible results against definitions used to determine the significance of those results. Five typologies include political access, individual policy impact, institutional policy impact, strategy influence, benefits, and enablers and constraints in the wider context. Each typology has sub-categories used to identify nuanced results.

Source: M&E Unit CSSF Eastern Africa: Itad Ltd and Altai Consulting (2017)



Proportionality | Data management | Issues of access and influence | **Third party monitoring** |  
Technology for MEL | Ethical considerations | Safeguarding | Introducing a gender-sensitive approach |  
Introducing a conflict-sensitive approach | Tools and support

## Third party monitoring

**Third party monitoring (TPM)** is the practice of contracting a third party (neither a donor nor implementor) to collect or verify monitoring data. It is increasingly used to overcome the challenges of monitoring in remote or restrictive environments.

TPM can fill critical evidence gaps by enabling real-time collection or verification of data. It has typically been limited to output-level data but is increasingly supporting outcome level results monitoring (see [Box 13 on evaluative monitoring](#)).

TPM by locally based data collectors can be very valuable where they have access to communities and can develop rapport that an external agent cannot.

However, TPM is best considered as a last resort for managing risk in contexts where donors consider it too insecure to send staff, as it can raise ethical and quality concerns (Kelly and Gaarder, 2017; Sagmeister *et al.*, 2016; see also section on [conflict sensitivity](#)) and significantly increase MEL costs.



Proportionality | Data management | Issues of access and influence | Third party monitoring | **Technology for MEL** | Ethical considerations | Safeguarding | Introducing a gender-sensitive approach | Introducing a conflict-sensitive approach | Tools and support

## Technology for MEL

Increasingly, technological solutions offer potential for addressing some of the challenges of data collection, data management and security in conflict-affected environments.

However, as an emerging area of practice, there is still much to learn.

### Box 18: Using technology for monitoring in insecure environments

The Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme conducted research amongst aid agencies in Afghanistan, Somalia, South Sudan and Syria around the challenges of monitoring aid, particularly constraints to access, the risk of violence and aid diversion. From the basis of these challenges, the study explores technology solutions based on their application in these four countries. The six technologies considered are:

- using mobile phones for monitoring and gathering feedback;
- digital data entry with tablets or smartphones;
- remote sensing and aerial imagery with satellites, radars or UAVs;
- location tracking;
- complementing feedback mechanisms with radio programmes; and
- communications with online platforms.

Source: Sagmeister *et al.* (2016)



Proportionality | Data management | Issues of access and influence | Third party monitoring | Technology for MEL | **Ethical considerations** | Safeguarding | Introducing a gender-sensitive approach | Introducing a conflict-sensitive approach | Tools and support

## Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are paramount when undertaking monitoring, evaluation and learning activities in conflict-affected settings. This is to ensure the process of conducting MEL, the evidence generated, and its use does not have unintended, negative consequences.

There are various standards that guide professionalism in monitoring and evaluation.

Ultimately, ethics principles call for those involved in MEL to:

- maximise benefit and minimise harm;
- respect people’s rights and dignity;
- act with honesty, competence and accountability; and
- deliver work of integrity and merit.

Ethical challenges or dilemmas can occur at any point in the MEL cycle – design, implementation and use. The principles and standards presented here should be kept in mind.

### Box 19: Ethics principles and standards for MEL

- MEL work should be useful, necessary and feasible.
- The design and conduct of MEL work should be sensitive to cultural, socio-economic, environmental and political context.
- Harm to individuals and communities is minimised and benefits maximised, risks are identified, and mitigating actions taken.
- Identity is protected and data secure.
- Participation is based on informed consent.
- Participants are treated with respect and dignity.
- Findings are disseminated to intended beneficiaries (if possible/appropriate).

Source: DFID (2019) Ethical Guidance for Research, Evaluation and Monitoring activities (forthcoming)



Proportionality | Data management | Issues of access and influence | Third party monitoring | Technology for MEL | Ethical considerations | **Safeguarding** | Introducing a gender-sensitive approach | Introducing a conflict-sensitive approach | Tools and support

## Safeguarding

Safeguarding in its broad sense means protecting people and the environment from unintended harm. This guidance is focused particularly on preventing and responding to harm caused by sexual exploitation, abuse, harassment or bullying. In all our work there is a responsibility to minimise the likelihood and impact of these actions towards both those we aim to help/support, and also those who are working in the sector.

The Stabilisation Unit is committed to applying certain safeguarding principles (Box 20) and expects our partners and their delivery chains to do the same.

The UK Department for International Development (DFID) has set out six areas that are relevant and achievable for all organisations and which set a benchmark of minimum standards that HMG partners, regardless of size or type, should aspire and work towards to promote a safeguarding environment that protects all children and vulnerable adults. [Read the full guidance](#)

### Box 20: Safeguarding principles

- Everyone has a responsibility for safeguarding.
- Do no harm.
- Organisations have a safeguarding duty of care to beneficiaries, staff and volunteers, including where down-stream partners are part of delivery. This includes children and vulnerable adults in the community who are not direct beneficiaries but may be vulnerable to abuse.
- Act with integrity, be transparent and accountable.
- All activity is done in the best interests of the child/vulnerable person.
- A child is defined as someone under the age of 18 regardless of the age of majority/consent in country.
- All children shall be treated equally, irrespective of race, gender, religion/or none, sexual orientation or disability.
- Organisations that work with children and vulnerable adults should apply a safeguarding lens to their promotional communications and fundraising activities.

These principles align with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Source: DFID (2018) Enhanced Due Diligence – Safeguarding for external partners



Proportionality | Data management | Issues of access and influence | Third party monitoring |  
Technology for MEL | Ethical considerations | Safeguarding | **Introducing a gender-sensitive approach** |  
Introducing a conflict-sensitive approach | Tools and support

**Practical steps to ensure that gender-sensitivity is embedded in the implementation of the MEL approach include, but are not limited to:**

 Click on the numbers to view the practical steps

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6



Proportionality | Data management | Issues of access and influence | Third party monitoring |  
Technology for MEL | Ethical considerations | Safeguarding | **Introducing a gender-sensitive approach** |  
Introducing a conflict-sensitive approach | Tools and support

**Practical steps to ensure that gender-sensitivity is embedded in the implementation of the MEL approach include, but are not limited to:**



Have research tools designed, or at a minimum reviewed, by local experts to ensure they are rooted in an understanding of gender roles and responsibilities relevant to the context.



Click on the numbers to view the practical steps





[Proportionality](#) | [Data management](#) | [Issues of access and influence](#) | [Third party monitoring](#) | [Technology for MEL](#) | [Ethical considerations](#) | [Safeguarding](#) | [Introducing a gender-sensitive approach](#) | [Introducing a conflict-sensitive approach](#) | [Tools and support](#)

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Have research tools designed, or at a minimum reviewed, by local experts to ensure they are rooted in an understanding of gender roles and responsibilities relevant to the context.



Ensure (to the extent possible) a gender balance in selection of respondents and a range of male/female views. Consider how to include those representing different age groups, ethnicities, geographical areas, and economic/social backgrounds etc. Remember men and women are not homogenous groups.



Click on the numbers to view the practical steps







[Proportionality](#) | [Data management](#) | [Issues of access and influence](#) | [Third party monitoring](#) | [Technology for MEL](#) | [Ethical considerations](#) | [Safeguarding](#) | [Introducing a gender-sensitive approach](#) | [Introducing a conflict-sensitive approach](#) | [Tools and support](#)

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Pilot data collection approaches with different groups to ensure feasibility and appropriateness.



**Click on the numbers to view the practical steps**

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6



[Proportionality](#) | [Data management](#) | [Issues of access and influence](#) | [Third party monitoring](#) | [Technology for MEL](#) | [Ethical considerations](#) | [Safeguarding](#) | [Introducing a gender-sensitive approach](#) | [Introducing a conflict-sensitive approach](#) | [Tools and support](#)

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Pilot data collection approaches with different groups to ensure feasibility and appropriateness.



Ensure that data collection methods are gender-sensitive. A local gender analysis will provide information on potential barriers to participation in data collection, such as location, time of day, or need for all-female data collection teams. This should also take into account how to ensure inclusion of different marginalised individuals.

For example:

- What practical measures need to be taken to minimise the time burden upon respondents, particularly those with caring responsibilities?
- What actions need to be taken to ensure individuals, who may have experienced multiple forms of discrimination, feel able to participate?
- What are the potential risks associated with participating in data collection and how can these be mitigated? (e.g. if an individual is seen to be speaking to 'outsiders').



Click on the numbers to view the practical steps





Proportionality | Data management | Issues of access and influence | Third party monitoring | Technology for MEL | Ethical considerations | Safeguarding | [Introducing a gender-sensitive approach](#) | Introducing a conflict-sensitive approach | Tools and support

## Practical steps to ensure that gender-sensitivity is embedded in the implementation of the MEL approach include, but are not limited to:



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Systematically monitor:

- the extent to which gender equality has been promoted by the intervention, and how;
- any potential negative effects the intervention has had on gender equality, or different individuals and how the intervention interacts with gender and other dimensions of identity (e.g. class, race, ethnicity, age, disability status, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, socio-economic status).



Click on the numbers to view the practical steps





Proportionality | Data management | Issues of access and influence | Third party monitoring | Technology for MEL | Ethical considerations | Safeguarding | [Introducing a gender-sensitive approach](#) | Introducing a conflict-sensitive approach | Tools and support

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For data collection in specialised areas, such as on issues of gender-based violence, ensure you seek support from technical specialists to avoid causing harm, and ensure the quality of information collected.



Click on the numbers to view the practical steps





Proportionality | Data management | Issues of access and influence | Third party monitoring |  
Technology for MEL | Ethical considerations | Safeguarding | Introducing a gender-sensitive approach |  
**Introducing a conflict-sensitive approach** | Tools and support

Practical steps to ensure that conflict-sensitivity is embedded in the implementation of the MEL approach include, but are not limited to:



Click on the numbers to view the practical steps

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5



Proportionality | Data management | Issues of access and influence | Third party monitoring |  
Technology for MEL | Ethical considerations | Safeguarding | Introducing a gender-sensitive approach |  
**Introducing a conflict-sensitive approach** | Tools and support

**Practical steps to ensure that conflict-sensitivity is embedded in the implementation of the MEL approach include, but are not limited to:**



Ensuring that changing conflict dynamics are understood (see also [conflict analysis](#)) and considered at all stages of the MEL process.



Click on the numbers to view the practical steps

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5



Proportionality | Data management | Issues of access and influence | Third party monitoring | Technology for MEL | Ethical considerations | Safeguarding | Introducing a gender-sensitive approach | **Introducing a conflict-sensitive approach** | Tools and support

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Awareness of context-specific protocols and approaches. For example, community-level research may require engagement of community leaders as *gatekeepers*.



Click on the numbers to view the practical steps

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5



Proportionality | Data management | Issues of access and influence | Third party monitoring | Technology for MEL | Ethical considerations | Safeguarding | Introducing a gender-sensitive approach | **Introducing a conflict-sensitive approach** | Tools and support

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Be explicit about the handling of information with all participants and seek informed consent for participation.



**Click on the numbers to view the practical steps**

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5





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Be explicit about the handling of information with all participants and seek informed consent for participation.

Throughout the process consider, question and mitigate the risk of exacerbating conflict, deepening social polarisation, exclusion or other underlying conflict drivers in relation to:

- the way that MEL activity is represented (in terms of purpose and scope) among participants;
- the selection of participants, the format for participation, and the nature and tone of questions;
- researcher movements and contacts in the field;
- the content of MEL outputs.

 Click on the numbers to view the practical steps

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5



Proportionality | Data management | Issues of access and influence | Third party monitoring | Technology for MEL | Ethical considerations | Safeguarding | Introducing a gender-sensitive approach | **Introducing a conflict-sensitive approach** | Tools and support

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- the way that MEL activity is represented (in terms of purpose and scope) among participants;
- the selection of participants, the format for participation, and the nature and tone of questions;
- researcher movements and contacts in the field;
- the content of MEL outputs.

Monitor, to the extent possible, any unintended consequences of the MEL activity and acknowledge these in the interests of transparency. This could be done through beneficiary feedback mechanisms.

 Click on the numbers to view the practical steps

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5



Proportionality | Data management | Issues of access and influence | Third party monitoring | Technology for MEL | Ethical considerations | Safeguarding | Introducing a gender-sensitive approach | Introducing a conflict-sensitive approach | **Tools and support**

## For information on **third party monitoring**:

- Sagmeister, E., Steets, J., Derzsi-Horvath, A. and Hannion, C. (2016) [The use of third-party monitoring in insecure contexts: lessons from Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria](#). Resource Paper. Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE).

## For information on the **role of technology** supporting MEL in challenging contexts:

- Dette, R. and Steets, J. (2016) [Innovating for access: the role of technology in monitoring aid in highly insecure environments](#) in Humanitarian Practice Network (eds). (2016) 'Humanitarian innovation'. Humanitarian Exchange. No 66. Overseas Development Institute.

## For information on **implementing MEL** in a **conflict and gender sensitive** way:

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