WHAT IS A THEORY OF CHANGE?

The log frame captures a four step logic – input, output, outcome and impact. However in reality the pathways through which change happens often have many more steps that are interlinked and can move both forward and backward and even skip steps. Theory of change has been developed to help capture that complexity.

Theory of Change (TOC) is a coherent connection between an organisation’s mission statement, its global goals and programme outcomes. It articulates the links between those being served by the programme, the strategies and activities that are being implemented and the planned outcomes in the Logical Framework Analysis (or other planning framework).

The TOC demonstrates a clear testable hypothesis about how change will occur that not only allows implementers to be accountable for results, but also makes the results more credible because they were predicted to occur in a certain way. There should be agreement amongst stakeholders about what defines success (the desired change) and what needs to happen to get there.

A theory of change can be a powerful communication tool that captures the complexity of a programme or project initiative. It provides a framework for measuring impact including dimensions of change and a menu of indicators to explore.

ELEMENTS OF A THEORY OF CHANGE?

The context for change: A conceptual piece, which considers how change happens in relation to the issues and problems that the organisation seeks to address. The analysis of the context will set the scene for decisions about how and why the organisation’s programmes chose to address issues in a particular way.

A Programme change pathway that articulates:

- The problems to be addressed and their underlying causes
- A vision of change – if all problems were successfully addressed what would it look like
- The population – organisations, groups and individuals you are working with and for
- Principles of engagement
- Ways of influencing change – with and for identified target groups
- Medium term changes that you expect to see as a result
- Contribution to one or more of the organisation’s global goals

The pathway should provide an analysis of the relationship that exists between all of these elements. A framework against which impact can be measured.
EXAMPLE OF A THEORY OF CHANGE PROCESS

A Theory of Change (ToC) is an on-going process of reflection that explores change and how it happens – the part that an organisation plays in a particular context, sector and/or group of people.

**Key steps in developing a Theory of Change:**

**Introductory workshop:** An introductory workshop on the theories behind ‘Theory of Change’ (may need an external facilitator) at a strategy meeting. This will allow staff to develop initial thinking around theories of change.

**Theory of Change working group:** At the workshop it should be agreed who will get involved in a small working group to take forward the idea of developing a Theory of Change (regional, country, or programme level). The group can be made up of country level staff, managers and advisors, and led by an appointed Project Manager.

**Writing a contextual paper on the programmatic area in the given context:** Based on experience and further research it will be necessary to develop a thought piece on the theme area for the organisation’s individual projects and programmes as each context is different. The paper needs to explore the underlying causes of the defined problem; how change happens in areas where the issue is prevalent (who and what are the different actors and factors that can bring about change); how the organisation or programme promotes change; and how the organisation can incorporate change into programme planning. The paper should also highlight how the programme will contribute to the organisation’s global goals. Once the paper is drafted it should be circulated to the Senior Management team and relevant country management for comments.

**Developing the Theory of Change:** After the development of the background paper which will define the programme’s contribution to change, it is time to focus in on developing a Theory of Change. A second workshop with all relevant stakeholders (including senior management) should set about developing an illustration of how the selected programme work leads to positive social change. This should include causal pathways and relationships, which are expected to bring about change. You will need to develop a comprehensive visual understanding of the organisation or programme’s vision of change including:

- The problems you are seeking to address and the underlying causes
- Who you (will) work with and how you work with them
- Barriers and facilitating factors (risk factors and assumptions)
- Medium term change the organisation hopes to influence
- The relationships between the above elements in achieving your goals
- Indicators that will provide evidence of change

The Theory of Change should refer to the organisational strategic plan and other key internal documents including monitoring frameworks and any operating principles. The start and end points of the Theory of Change should be the same as the organisational strategy. The key difference will be what is what’s in the middle – the pathway to getting there.

**Final design (and explanatory notes):** An agreed diagram should then be finalised with one or two pages of explanatory notes for the Theory of Change diagram.

The diagram should capture all sub-sectors that the programme/ organisation aims to change, and the assistance levels (from community to Global/regional). For example, it may show that in order to influence the identified problem there is a need to work at levels affecting behavioural change at community level, creating structural change at local level, and promoting policy, process and institutional change at National, Regional and Global levels.

The explanatory notes included in the framework and pre-conditions and drivers for change form an integral part of the theory of change which will assist the organisation to monitor the change brought about by its work. It is important to remember that the diagram itself and the background description is not enough – there should also be background documentation supporting the analysis and decision-making.

Once you have developed your diagram it will be important to highlight the indicators that will provide evidence of change as these will be the foundation for your M&E system.
CRITICAL QUESTIONS FOR PROGRAMME DESIGN AND PLANNING USING TOC

Stage 1: How does Change happen?
Step back from your own programme and think about the bigger picture of change in relation to the thematic areas and target groups that you plan to work with.

• What is the overall vision for the future for these groups of people (to which your project/ programme will contribute)?

• How is power structured in relation to this issue or group and what factors either long term or short term could influence change (+/-)

• What are the top level changes that would support this vision?: what would need to be in place for this vision to be realised (who would be doing what differently? What would be in place?)

Stage 2: Analysis of your programme’s specific contribution to change

• Given this vision and top level changes that are required, and a clear analysis of other actors in the picture, potential allies and barriers and your own strengths and focus, what exactly can your programme contribute directly/indirectly?

Stage 3: Developing the change pathway:

• Based on this, what is the overall goal of your project/ programme for this phase?

• Working backwards from the goal, what changes (for whom) would have to be in place for this goal to be realised in the medium-term?

• Looking at this, who do you need to work with? What changes in knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviours will contribute to these identified medium term changes?

• So what do you need to do with whom? And how will these planned strategies (activities) link together and contribute to the changes you want to see at all levels?

Stage 4: Identifying and Testing Assumptions

• What assumptions are you making about how change will happen? How is your thinking informed by facts about ‘what works’ (evidence), particularly in the context in which you are working?

• What other actors/factors (including political factors) might help or hinder you in achieving these planned changes?

• Why do you think this approach is the best way of achieving your programme goal?

Stages 5 and 6: Review and adapt (6-12 months)

• What is changing and how significant is this? Which change pathways have been more successful or less successful? What should we do differently?