Theory of Change

2021

A Theory of Change describes how change is assumed to come about through an intervention.

The theory is usually laid out in a diagram showing the connections between activities and outcome – the causal pathways or results chains. But more than this, it makes clear that these causal pathways rest on a set of assumptions.

A Theory of Change (ToC) is the result of discussing and mapping how your project is expected to achieve its Outcome and longer-term Impact (which are also included in the logframe), by looking at how your activities and Outputs are linked together to lead to the expected results whilst considering the assumptions of these links.

Why do we need a theory of change?

A Theory of Change for a project takes our assumptions about what we want or expect to happen and tests those assumptions to see if they hold true.

A Theory of Change can be used as a:

Strategy tool
- To assist teams to work together to achieve a shared understanding of a project
- To make projects more effective by understanding outcomes and their causes
- To identify any hidden assumptions and their importance (or lack of)

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tool
- To determine what needs measuring (and what does not) to support evaluation activities
- To encourage teams to think about evidence in a more focused way
- To act as the basis for claims about attribution

Communication tool
- To provide a quick visual picture of the project's aims
- To highlight and describe the process of change
- To improve partnership-working through development of a shared understanding.

Theory of Change and Logframes

Your project's ToC plays an important role in the development of your logframe and should ideally be created before your logframe. It is important to remember that the scope of the Theory of Change is often much greater than that of the programmatic logframe. Although the ToC and logframes have some overlap, they are different tools.

Logframes are a monitoring tool to measure progress against the Results Chain, comparing planned and actual results along selected causal pathways. They include indicators, baselines, targets and sources to measure progress

A ToC can be used to prompt critical reflection and re-thinking of approach, and are of particular value for evaluation processes.

A ToC might also be a graphic representation of project components, but is often less rigidly structured than a logframe, allowing you to better demonstrate interlinkages within your project design.

Logframes usually start with a designed project and then outline the key components, in comparison a ToC takes the intended project impact as the starting point, and then looks at what approaches are required to achieve it – i.e. it is a backwards mapping exercise.

A ToC diagram should be accompanied by a narrative that explains the context, what the logic is based on, and how success will be measured – i.e. the other elements of your application form.

The essential distinctive elements of ToC compared to other approaches are to:

- identify **specific causal links** among outputs and outcomes, with evidence
- describe the causal pathways by which **interventions are expected to have effect**, and **identify indicators** to test their validity over time
- be explicit about **assumptions** about these causal pathways, which includes an analysis of **barriers** and **enablers** as well as indicators of **success**.

A good Theory of Change will be:

Meaningful	representing action that's valued and worth doing; influencing the design, management and M&E.
Plausible	making good sense; is logical, comprehensive, clear and understandable
Feasible	it can actually be carried out; it's practical and focussed
Testable	results chains and assumptions can be verified. Evidence gaps are noted.

Darwin Initiative - Theory of Change Requirements:

You are welcome to use whichever format you would like for your Theory of Change but there are some **key elements** we would expect your Theory of Change to:

- Include **inputs/activities**, **outputs**, **shorter-term outcomes**, **longer-term outcomes** and **impact**. The specific terminology may vary but as much as possible we would encourage you to align the terminology with that used in your logframe.
- Use **arrows** and **lines** to clearly mark how the elements of your project link to each other
- Outline key **risk** and **assumptions** as well as **enabling conditions**
- You may use **colour coding** and different **shaped boxes** to clearly identify project elements.
- **This should be in PDF and fit on one page** (A4)

Your Theory of Change should closely correspond with your application form and in particular the logframe – i.e. they should "talk" to each other – and be directly supported by the narrative included in your answer to your **Pathway to Change**.

Further resources:

- Intro to Theory of Change: https://www.theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/
- Global Environment Facility – Theory of Change Primer: https://www.thegef.org/sites/default/files/council-meeting-documents/EN_GEF_STAP_C.57_Inf.04_Theory%20of%20Change%20Primer_0.pdf
- Creating your Theory of Change. NPC's practical guide. https://www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/creating-your-theory-of-change-npcs-practical-guide/
- Conservation Standards – Case Study in Laos - https://conservationstandards.org/library-item/theory-of-change-study-of-successful-use-in-laos/