

JSRP Paper 17

Theories of Change in International Development: Communication, Learning, or Accountability?

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August 2014

Acknowledgements: This paper benefitted from the useful comments of Matthew Arnold (The Asia Foundation), Patrick Barron (The Asia Foundation), Lisa Denney (Overseas Development Institute), Ramani Jayasundere (The Asia Foundation), Henry Radice (London School of Economics and Political Science), Mareike Schomerus (London School of Economics and Political Science) and Danielle Stein (Effective Development Group).

This paper would not have been possible without the constructive, critical and patient approach of The Asia Foundation, whose staff facilitated and participated in this research throughout. The author retains sole responsibility for the findings of this paper.

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Abstract

Critically analysing assumptions is a much needed endeavour in international development policy and practice: existing management tools rarely encourage critical thinking and there are considerable political, organisational and bureaucratic constraints to the promotion of learning throughout the sector. The Theory of Change approach – an increasingly popular management tool and discourse in development – hopes to change some of that. This approach explicitly aims to challenge and change implicit assumptions in world views and programme interventions in the lives of others, yet little is known about the extent to which it really does so. This paper provides a much needed analysis of how Theories of Change are used in the day-to-day practice of an international development organisation, The Asia Foundation. They use the approach in three ways: to communicate, to learn and to be held accountable, which each exist in some tension with each other. Creating Theories of Change was often found to be a helpful process by programme staff, since it provided a greater freedom to explain and analyse programme interventions. However, the introduction of the approach also had some troubling effects, for example, by creating top-down accounts of change which spoke more to donor interests than to the ground realities of people affected by these interventions. Ultimately, this paper argues that while a Theory of Change approach can create space for critical reflection, this requires a much broader commitment to learning from individuals, organisations, and the development sector itself.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The problem

Many of our assumptions about how the world works are based on implicit theories of change, based on our worldview, developed through our education and upbringing. Eyben et al. argue that “they may have become so embedded that we no longer question whether they are the most useful for our purpose, or if we are using them as well as we could.”¹ In the international development industry, which (ostensibly at least) aims to improve the well-being of people often in very different places and situations, critical reflection on these assumptions is essential; in one more limited sense so that interventions ‘do no harm’, and more optimistically to ensure they genuinely improve the lives of those at the receiving end. This is not only about critically analysing overarching world views, but deconstructing the basic assumptions which underpin programme interventions to determine whether they make sense in changing the lives of others.

Problematically, the dominant models and tools for analysing and evaluating change processes in international development tend to constrain rather than promote such critical reflection. So, for example, it is fairly common for donors and aid organisations to support the training of historically violent police forces in conflict-affected countries. This is a complex and morally perilous undertaking; and such an intervention may rest upon multiple (and sometimes competing or contradictory) theories of social change, linked to differing understandings of how individual behaviour and context-specific cultures of practice can be shaped. What we need to know is what assumptions underpin that intervention? Do those assumptions hold true over the life of the programme? To readers outside the development industry, it might be taken as rather obvious that these questions need answering. But to those within, they will recognise some familiar problems and debates.

Management tools used within the aid industry – most obviously the logical framework (logframe) approach – rarely allow the flexibility to analyse the messy social processes that these interventions are dealing with. Measures of success through such approaches tend to be pared down to, for example, counting police officers trained, which while an important thing to know, tells us little about whether the training has been effective or not. Ultimately, there are many ways of learning about and assessing dynamics of change, but the ones that the aid industry is most strictly expected to use are not really fit for purpose.

Critically analysing our assumptions is not simply limited by choice of management tool but also by the power relations embedded in the aid industry. For example, implementing organisations are rarely incentivised to present the complexity of their interventions to donors, since admitting the unpredictability of change through an intervention doesn’t inspire confidence that the programme will get ‘results’ – and in turn get them funding – however realistic and honest that assessment is. Donors and implementers alike have to negotiate the political context in which they work, which may also constrain the honesty of their analysis of their own and others’ policy and practice. This is the context in which the ‘Theory of Change’ approach has rapidly emerged as a new management tool in the aid industry.

¹ Eyben, R., Kidder, T., Rowlands, J., & Bronstein, A. (2008). ‘Thinking about change for development practice: a case study from Oxfam UK’, *Development in Practice*, 18(2), p. 201.

1.2 Aims and methods

This paper seeks to address a critical gap in understanding the actual effects of using a Theory of Change approach and considers how the approach may be better understood, if its aim is to improve development policy and practice. It does so through an analysis of the emerging findings of a collaboration between the Justice and Security Research Programme² (JSRP) and The Asia Foundation³ (the Foundation), which began in April 2012, with the aim of exploring Theory of Change approaches in international development practice.⁴

This paper will first further explain what a Theory of Change approach is, where it has come from and how the Asia Foundation have approached the tool. Second, it explores the three key ways The Asia Foundation use a Theory of Change approach (to communicate, to learn and to be held accountable) and highlights the problems and possibilities with these interrelated approaches. Third, it will demonstrate the effects of the dominant development discourses of results and evidence on the Theory of Change approach. Fourth, this paper rethinks the Theory of Change approach itself, presenting six key findings which explore its possible effects and future in development policy and practice. Ultimately, this paper argues that a Theory of Change approach represents a good space for those in the aid industry to critically reflect on (and then change) their policy and practice; however, this space can be heavily constrained if the correct incentives are not in place for that to happen.

This paper draws on a wide range of sources. It builds upon a literature review on Theory of Change approaches and uses emerging research on the topic.⁵ It synthesises the research findings of multiple JSRP authors on Theories of Change with The Asia Foundation across Timor-Leste, Nepal, the Philippines and Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the author conducted additional interviews with the country staff in each location in order to allow them to reflect on Theories of Change and the research collaboration after initial primary research was complete. Further interviews were also conducted with UK Department for International Development (DfID) staff. This paper also draws on the reflections of the author based upon his participation in multiple workshops and meetings concerning the project as well as his own research fellowship with the Asia Foundation in Sri Lanka for six months.

² The JSRP is a research consortium led by the Department of International Development (ID) at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), developed in partnership with academic and media organisations from the global North and South, and with funding from the UK Department for International Development (DfID).

³ The Asia Foundation is a non-profit international development organisation, headquartered in San Francisco, with a network of offices in 18 Asian countries and in Washington, DC.³ They have been working directly in many countries across Asia for decades, with programmes bridging governance and law, economic development, women's empowerment, environment, and regional cooperation.

⁴ One set of research and outputs of the collaboration aims to critically interrogate specific interventions by the Foundation within the framework of their Theories of Change, while another set, of which this paper is part, explore how Theory of Change itself has been approached, and the lessons we can draw from this for the wider academic and practitioner communities. For a full list of publications, see <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/jsrp/publications/>

⁵ Stein, D. and Valters, C. (2012). 'Understanding 'Theory of Change' in International Development: A Review of Existing Knowledge', *JSRP Paper 1*, London: Justice and Security Research Programme and The Asia Foundation.

2. The Theory of Change approach

2.1 Where did it come from and what should it do?

The current evolution of Theory of Change draws on two streams of development and social programme practice: evaluation and informed social practice.⁶ From the evaluation perspective, Theory of Change is part of broader programme analysis or programme theory. In the development field, it also grew out of the tradition of logic planning models such as the logical framework approach developed from the 1970s onwards.⁷ The notion of developing informed social practice has a long history; practitioners have often sought (and used) tools to attempt to consciously reflect on the underlying theories for development practice. In its early conceptualisation in 1995, Weiss described it as “a theory of how and why an initiative works.”⁸ At this stage of its evolution, articulating these theories commonly involves exploring a set of beliefs or assumptions about how change will occur, often taking the form of a document and/or diagram explaining how and why the organisation believes their intervention will lead to a change.⁹

Theories of Change are increasingly mandatory for implementing agencies to submit to donors in the aid industry. This appears to have begun with the UK's Department for International Development (DfID), but has since mushroomed so that most donors now require Theories of Change as a standard component of programme design. What is clear is that in part, whatever the donor or context, the approach seeks to address the problems inherent in existing models of analysing change, with its core aim of uncovering and critically interrogating assumptions about how change happens.¹⁰ In this respect, it is useful to draw a distinction between a Theory of Change as a formal document and as a broader approach to thinking about development work. As highlighted in Stein and Valters (2012), for some Theory of Change is a precise planning tool, most likely an extension of the ‘assumptions’ box in a logframe; for others it may be a less formal, often implicit ‘way of thinking’ about how a project is expected to work; or beyond this, an approach aiming to encourage a politically informed, reflexive and complex approach to development.¹¹ These different choices will reflect different ideas about what a Theory of Change approach is trying to achieve, as well as the underlying politics and ideology of those developing it.

⁶ Stein, D. and Valters, C. (2012).

⁷ Natsios, A. (2010). *The Clash of the Counter-bureaucracy and Development*. Centre for Global Development.

⁸ Weiss, C.H. (1995). *Nothing as Practical as Good Theory: Exploring Theory-Based Evaluation for Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Children and Families*. In J. Connell, A. Kubisch, L. Schorr and C. Weiss (Eds.) *New Approaches to Evaluating Community Initiatives: Concepts, Methods and Contexts*. New York: Aspen Institute.

⁹ As in GrantCraft. (n.d.). *Mapping Change: Using a Theory of Change to Guide Planning and Evaluation*.; Rogers, P. J. (2012). *Introduction to impact evaluation*. Impact Evaluations Notes, March(1); OECD Development Assistance Committee. (2008). *Guidance on Evaluation Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Activities*. Paris; Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. (2011). *The Strategy Lifecycle: A Guide*. Available at <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/about/Documents/The%20Strategy%20Lifecycle.pdf>

¹⁰ Stein and Valters. (2012). Gready, Paul (2013) *Organisational Theories of Change in the Era of Organisational Cosmopolitanism: lessons from ActionAid's human rights-based approach*, *Third World Quarterly*, 34:8, p. 1339; Eyben et al. (2008), pp 202–203.

¹¹ Green, Duncan. (2013). ‘What is a Theory of Change and how do we use it?’, *From Poverty to Power Blog*, 13 August 2013. Available at <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/what-is-a-theory-of-change-and-does-it-actually-help/>

2.2 Existing debates

Theory of Change has drawn plenty of praise and criticism from those in development and academia. Tom Parks, The Asia Foundation's former Regional Director for Governance and Conflict, has argued that "Theories of Change help the Asia Foundation think more critically about how power shapes aid and maintains the status quo."¹² Research by CARE into a range of peacebuilding Theories of Change has highlighted how they *can* clarify project logic and tackle inadequate assumptions, identify the gaps between local and national level changes and emphasise the need for conflict analysis and enhance conflict sensitivity.¹³ For many, as Vogel highlighted in her review, Theories of Change provide a more flexible alternative to working with logframes for complex programmes and contexts.¹⁴

One potential problem is that Theories of Change can be based on weak and selective evidence bases and build in all kinds of assumptions about the world that are not sufficiently problematised. In this respect they can reinforce and mask the problem they purport to solve, creating a misleading sense of security about the level of critical analysis a programme has been subjected to. Another concern is that they can also encourage linear, mechanistic and teleological thinking, based on the idea we can accurately predict the outcomes of our interventions, an assumption that rarely plays out in reality; in the complex and often conflict-affected regions of the world where the aid industry increasingly works, change is rarely predictable.

One practical concern is that many practitioners feel they have seen this kind of thing before, its underpinning idea full of promise, but quickly discarded if it challenges power too much or is no longer a buzzword in the industry. International development has a penchant for idea fads which "extends to results and evidence artefacts", exemplified by the rise and fall of the similarly well-intentioned but distinct artefacts of structural analysis and drivers of change.¹⁵ Equally, a recent review of the state of political economy analysis argued that despite its original transformative goals, it today has become a tool, or product, 'sold' to donors and 'done' externally, and it is no longer fit for purpose.¹⁶ There are lessons to be learnt here for the Theories of Change approach. Constantly changing approaches to analysing change can create weariness in practitioners, who may approach a new tool cynically, knowing that next year they may well have to adapt again to the latest fad.

However, this highlights the way in which many of the difficulties with Theories of Change are not unique to the tool itself but are apparent throughout development policy and practice, often linked to the tensions brought on by the overlapping power relations between donors, governments, NGOs and citizens. What remains crucial to understand is how this new artefact functions within that system of power relations and what room there is to challenge the more pernicious effects of that system. While some interesting studies are emerging,¹⁷ there is very little research on how organisations approach Theories of Change and the effects on development processes, policies and practice. As highlighted by the *Big Push Forward*,

¹² Comment made during public conference hosted by JSRP and The Asia Foundation entitled 'Evidence and Power in Development Policy and Practice', 02/07/2013. Available on Storify via: <http://storify.com/JSRP/knowledge-matters-thinking-about-change>.

¹³ CARE International UK. (2012). *Defining Theories of Change*. London.

¹⁴ Vogel, I. (2012). *Review of the use of "Theory of Change" in international development*. DFID, (April),

¹⁵ Scott, Z. (2007) 'The changing face of 'Drivers of Change'. *Public Admin. Dev.*, 27: 85–90

¹⁶ Fisher, J. and Marquette, H. (2014), 'Donors Doing Political Economy Analysis - From Process to Product (and Back Again)', *Developmental Research Programme. Research Paper 28*.

¹⁷ For example, see CARE (2012).

"understanding the dynamics of their use in a particular organisational context may allow us to re frame artefacts, or guide (more) intelligent adoption of the results/evidence agenda".¹⁸

2.3 The Asia Foundation's approach

The Asia Foundation's approach to Theories of Change has been a 'learning through doing' process.¹⁹ Bureaucratic tools come and go in international development, but there has been a clear desire within the Asia Foundation to grasp this opportunity to deepen their understanding of the contexts in which they work and the effects their interventions may have. The nature and extent of engagement with the approach has been heavily driven by considerable personal commitment from key members of staff. Their desire to use this opportunity is partly evidenced by engaging in the collaboration with the Justice and Security Research Programme; however, it is also demonstrated by their introduction of a Theory of Change approach into a major partnership with the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DfAT, formerly AusAid) that TAF has across several countries.²⁰ Both their approach to Theory of Change and their theories themselves have been evolving as they work – but also as part of the research process which the JSRP-TAF collaboration has instigated.

The JSRP's primary research looked at the Foundation's use of Theories of Change for community mediation programmes in Nepal and Sri Lanka, for conflict management in the Philippines and for sub-national governance and community policing in Timor-Leste.²¹ The Theories of Change that the Foundation wrote in all instances were programmatic, arguing how and why a specific programme they undertook would contribute to processes of change in each country context. At their most basic, these took an initial linear form similar to common 'if...then' causal statements associated with Theories of Change. For example, in the Philippines, one of two main theories was entitled "Community-led Efforts to Improve Local Security" which argued:

"By supporting community-led efforts to improve relations with security forces, violent incidents will be less common and less severe. Improved relations between conflict-affected communities and security forces (and within communities themselves) will reduce the risk of tensions and incidents that result from poor communication."

In Nepal and Sri Lanka respectively, a 'local conflict transformation theory' and 'state-community collaboration theory' hypothesised the relationship between local mediation services and improved access to justice, social harmony and state-society relations. In Timor-Leste, an 'improved governance interface theory' argued that by increasing the influence and

¹⁸ The Big Push Forward is a network of practitioners identifying and sharing strategies for encouraging funders to adopt additional, useful approaches to impact assessment and reporting of international aid programmes and projects. See Big Push Forward. (2013). *The Politics of Evidence Conference Report*. April 23-24, 2013, at the Institute of Development Studies, UK.

¹⁹ Email correspondence with Matthew Arnold, Assistant Director, Program Strategy, Innovation and Learning, The Asia Foundation.

²⁰ Here analysed via the Philippines office.

²¹ In the four main countries of study, the programmes under analysis were funded as part of a flexible 5-year Programme Partnership agreement with the UK's Department for International Development (DfID). For more information on PPA agreements, visit <https://www.gov.uk/programme-partnership-arrangements-ppas>

capacity of local 'Suku Councils' and by strengthening the relationship between these councils and different levels of government, there would be improvements in perceptions of the informal/formal interface by rural populations, improved government-led programmes and services, and that decentralisation would better reflect rural communities' interests. These theories were always multi-level causal chains, seeking to explore the connections between programmatic activities, immediate outcomes and higher processes of social change.²²

3. An organisational view

The following section looks at how The Asia Foundation uses Theories of Change as a tool for three tasks: communication, learning and accountability. Each of these uses reflects the broader internal needs of aid organisations in their day-to-day work, as well as external pressures to communicate their ideas in different mediums, to learn, and to be accountable (or demonstrate results in order to receive funding). The Theory of Change guidance literature tends to encourage all three tasks—and more.²³ However, the three-pronged approach in this paper is drawn specifically from how the Foundation uses the approach.

Before analysing these approaches, it is worth noting some practical constraints on how Theories of Change operate. First, the approach can change based on when it is introduced in the programme cycle. Many suggest Theories of Change are best introduced before a programme has begun – to fulfil a planning function – and to raise critical questions about the role and need for an organisation's intervention.²⁴ If a programme has been running for many years before a Theory of Change approach has been introduced, there may also be more difficulty in shifting deeply embedded assumptions about the role and impact of that programme. Equally, how Theory of Change is approached will depend upon the type of programme or project to which it is applied. Some programmes are (or should be) built around adaption, ongoing reflection and constant critical engagement that is likely then to be reflected in the use and content of a Theory of Change. This also relates to the funding structure of the programme: a programme that is tied to a rigid funding structure and short term outputs is unlikely to incentivise staff to create a flexible and regularly updated Theory of Change.

3.1 Communication

Inside The Asia Foundation, Theories of Change appear to have two communication purposes. First, to communicate the assumptions and goals of an intervention to staff within the organisation; and second, to communicate externally with donors, partners and governments. Stein shows how in Nepal, "the Foundation now uses explicit Theories of Change primarily to describe community mediation's goals to staff, partners and donors..."²⁵ In Sri Lanka, the approach was largely used to describe the effects of the community mediation programme to donors, although its broad level claims were also discussed with the

²² A typology is provided in Jones, H. (2011). 'A guide to monitoring and evaluating policy influence'. *ODI Briefing Note*. London: Overseas Development Institute.

²³ In our literature review in 2012 we demonstrated that the purpose of Theory of Change falls into four broad categories: strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation, description and learning. Stein and Valters. (2012), p. 6.

²⁴ Green, Duncan. (2013a).

²⁵ Stein, D. (2013). 'Community Mediation and Social Harmony in Nepal', *JSRP Paper 5*, London: Justice and Security Research Programme and The Asia Foundation.

Sri Lankan Ministry of Justice, which is the primary body responsible for the programme.²⁶ In the Philippines, staff viewed Theories of Change as beneficial because they were “a way of getting to some agreement on strategies...we can see it’s useful for a tool of communication and collaboration”²⁷

In each of the countries, a Theory of Change became a key way of presenting the programme to a range of stakeholders. This is positive in so far as it allows organisations to describe coherently and concisely the work they are doing. Theories of Change have the advantage – perhaps compared to a logframe – of being readable narratives of how change happens. Creating a Theory of Change ‘story’ gives NGOs a way of presenting their work that is comprehensible and accessible to different kinds of audiences.

However there are some potential pitfalls in using Theories of Change in these ways. For example, if a Theory of Change prioritises a top-down understanding of change, this can have negative effects when communicated to donors and other stakeholders. The Theory of Change development process at The Asia Foundation commonly involved only a few people in the organisation – often a core of country staff – and there was limited engagement with the governments, partners and end-users involved in the intervention, although evidence cited in the Theories of Change did include some of these perspectives. There is no reason why Theories of Change have to be done in this way, although the incentives to engage with end-users may be limited, since Theories of Change are required by donors, with no requirement that they reflect local understandings of change. This is a problem many staff members were well aware of. As one senior technical advisor at The Asia Foundation stated:

How are Theories of Change actually developed? Is there enough consultation with the people who are supposed to benefit? If there is proper involvement, not token involvement, then these problems [of misleading Theories of Change] wouldn’t come up.²⁸

This is a long-standing problem that is not unique to the Theories of Change approach; upwards rather than downwards accountability is common, since funding comes from donors in foreign countries. Yet a failure to ensure genuine participation of end-users in the development of Theories of Change may increase the gap between local actors’ understandings of change processes and those in head offices and abroad. As Eyben et al. note, we need to “appreciate that those in whose interests we claim to be acting may have very different ways of understanding how change does or does not happen”.²⁹

A top-down Theory of Change approach can have rather strange effects: in Nepal, Stein recognised how claims that did not have “strong evidence to support them found their way into the discourse of country office programme staff as well as the local mediators themselves”.³⁰ The creation of quite a powerful top-down narrative is particularly problematic when it embodies popular categories and ways of thinking – such as social harmony or state-society relations – rather than being the result of an honest learning and

²⁶ Valters, C. (2013). ‘Community Mediation and Social Harmony in Sri Lanka: A Theories in Practice Paper’, *JSRP Paper 4* (May), London: Justice and Security Research Programme and The Asia Foundation.

²⁷ Focus group with Programme Staff, The Asia Foundation Philippines, 07/11/2013.

²⁸ Interview with Ramani Jayasundere, Senior Technical Advisor, The Asia Foundation Sri Lanka, 07/11/2013.

²⁹ Eyben, R. et al. (2008), pp. 201 – 212

³⁰ Email discussion on 20/11/2013 with Danielle Stein, author of Stein, D. (2013).

reflection process on assumptions, values and strategic choices.³¹ Another issue here is that if a Theory of Change has been developed in a politically expedient way, and then is used to establish the goals of the programme to all staff, it can have a simplifying and depoliticising effect on those implementing the programme (also see section 3.3).

However, according to Rowland and Smith, a lesser involvement and understanding of the theory – even among programme staff – is not automatically problematic. Regarding The Asia Foundation programmes in Timor Leste, they argued that:

Among more junior staff, we observed some gaps in knowledge of the specific Theory of Change behind the local governance programme, but this was a detail rather than a substantive...[since] the local programme team had a substantive understanding of the objectives of the Theory of Change behind their programme.³²

Rowland and Smith make clear that the rest of the team still managed to understand the theory due to the ability of the managerial team to communicate the goals of the programme clearly. As highlighted above, however, if the approach is to be used to communicate the goals of the programme to staff, it may be important not to oversimplify or depoliticise the Theory of Change.

One further issue is that if Theories of Change are used to communicate ideas to key stakeholders, practitioners should be careful that the message they communicate is in line with or constructively challenges their perspective on the programme. For example, in Sri Lanka, the claim was made that supporting mediation could lead to improvements in access to justice, social harmony and state-society relations. The latter two were supported by little evidence – and the ideas were, in any case, developed independently of the Sri Lankan government, which is the primary actor supporting mediation. This can possibly lead to a process of mutual engagement and learning, but also to puzzlement as to where these narratives have come from.

These issues present some clear challenges for Theory of Change approaches: in one respect Theories of Change need to be honest accounts of change when they are widely communicated, yet they may also need to align with other actors' understanding of change, particularly in politically difficult contexts. This perhaps points to the need to have layers of Theories of Change for different audiences, but also to the general difficulty of developing Theories of Change that respond to these different actors and their needs. What we see, then, is that Theories of Change can be useful methods of communication, but those developing them may need to negotiate multiple actors and interests.

3.2 Learning

Given that Theories of Change are mainly concerned with uncovering and critically appraising assumptions, learning, presumably, is a key goal of the process. According to Vogel, "assumptions represent the values, beliefs, norms and ideological perspectives, both personal and professional, that inform the interpretations that teams and stakeholders bring to

³¹ For critiques of Theories of Change see <http://www.hivos.net/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Themes/Theory-of-Change/Resources/7.-What-is-the-critique-on-ToC>.

³² Rowland, Nicholas and Smith, Claire Q. (2014). 'Rebuilding State-Society Relations in Post-War States: Assessing a Theory of Change Approach to Local Governance Reform in Timor Leste', *JSRP Paper 15*. London: the Justice and Security Research Programme and the Asia Foundation, pp. 15-16.

bear on a programme.”³³ It seems that the Theory of Change approach is aiming at ‘double-loop’ rather than ‘single-loop’ learning: with single loop learning, critical reflections operate within the current governing variables of an organisation. With double loop learning, goals, values plans and rules are questioned, thus raising the possibility of a change in the ways strategies and consequences are framed. Problematically, the latter is notoriously hard to achieve and often is guided by existing practices of learning and adaptive thinking.³⁴

The opportunity to make explicit previously implicit understandings of change processes was largely welcomed by The Asia Foundation staff. Tom Parks has argued that: “For years we worked with implicit Theories of Change...We felt we knew what worked on the ground but didn't write it down”.³⁵ For him the “Theory of Change process is a great way of discrediting bad theories; we've seen it happen.”³⁶ Often the effect of the approach appeared to be quite informal: one staff member highlighted how “issues creep into everyday language...at a philosophical level, the Theory of Change is [creating] learning across programmes”.³⁷

For some, Theory of Change introduced a relatively new way of thinking and learning. Silas Everett, former TAF country representative of Timor-Leste, argued that Theory of Change encouraged asking a “whole new set of questions”.³⁸ In relation to his current position as the country representative of Cambodia, he recounted how a group of youths had come to The Asia Foundation seeking to fund social networking advocacy on illegal logging. He noted that: “It's not to say before Theory of Change I wouldn't have had concerns, but after using it I asked deeper questions”.³⁹

What is clear is that Theories of Change rarely unfold as predicted; they have to be adapted and reworked as new information emerges.⁴⁰ This was backed up by a Programme Director in the Philippines: “I maybe have three versions [of Theories of Change] in the same day, literally; we are trying to constantly clarify and challenge ourselves to say ‘is that what we understand is going on?’”⁴¹ This office also highlighted the importance of having a ‘challenge function’, where the Theory of Change could be regularly critically appraised by both the team members and outside voices.⁴²

Problematically, other offices revisited their Theories of Change, but largely just to review it under the requirements of submitting it to DfID. This was in part linked to scepticism about whether insights gained in the process could translate into ongoing learning. As one staff member argued, “as far as the donors are concerned, they use it to see if it [the programme] is

³³ Vogel, I. (2012), p.26

³⁴ See Argyris, C., & Schön, D. (1978) *Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective*, Reading, Mass: Addison Wesley and an online discussion available at <http://infed.org/mobi/chris-argyris-theories-of-action-double-loop-learning-and-organizational-learning/>

³⁵ Comment made by Zaira Drammis during a public conference hosted by JSRP and The Asia Foundation entitled ‘Evidence and Power in Development Policy and Practice’, 02/07/2013.

³⁶ Comment made during public conference hosted by JSRP and The Asia Foundation entitled ‘Evidence and Power in Development Policy and Practice’, 02/07/2013.

³⁷ Rowland and Smith. (2014), p. 19

³⁸ Interview with Silas Everett, Country Representative of The Asia Foundation Cambodia, 05/11/2013.

³⁹ Interview with Silas Everett, Country Representative of The Asia Foundation Cambodia, 05/11/2013.

⁴⁰ Comment made during public conference hosted by JSRP and The Asia Foundation entitled ‘Evidence and Power in Development Policy and Practice’, 02/07/2013.

⁴¹ Interview with Jaime Faustino, Programme Director, Economic Reform and Development Entrepreneurship, The Asia Foundation Philippines, 31/10/2013.

⁴² Interview with Steven Rood, Country Director for The Asia Foundation Philippines, 06/11/2013

justifiable...and as far as I know there is no particular tool to go back and look at whether it is right or not.”⁴³ However, this also relates to the ongoing approaches to learning and accountability within specific country offices dynamics, as well as to the individual approaches of key staff members.

Research under the JSRP and Asia Foundation collaboration also provided a form of ‘challenge function’ to the Theories of Change. Researchers were generally in-country for three months, with significant time spent in discussion with the country staff, and with primary research discussed regularly. While the consequences of this research collaboration are emerging, initial reactions indicate that such a challenge function comes up against significant barriers to encourage change; some staff are attached to their own institutional ideas about how change happens and to some extent committed to them through funding and documentation. Staff may create bureaucratic (and possibly monetary) waves with donors by modifying their Theories of Change. Hesitancy about modifying Theories of Change may also be because ultimately a Theory of Change approach is marginal to the organisation’s everyday practice, amongst an array of other tools and demands on their time. This highlights how donors and the organisations themselves need to create broader incentive structures to encourage learning, of which a Theory of Change approach could be part.

However it should also be noted that researchers themselves will often approach their work with pre-conceived ideas of how change happens; one finding emerging from multiple workshops between the JSRP and the Foundation is a need for researchers to be modest and to seek to learn from the lived experience of practitioners. The idea of an ‘outsider’ coming in to review a programme was consistently seen as valuable by Asia Foundation staff, but this needs to go hand-in-hand with the appropriate in-country expertise and modesty in approach, if there is to be mutual learning.

Moving beyond single-loop learning to double-loop should be a key element of Theories of Change. Double loop learning will not take place if underlying assumptions and theories are not revisited regularly and critically. While one of the biggest benefits Theory of Change may bring is of greater organisational learning, this requires commitment to a broader model of adaptive and reflective practice. However it should be emphasised that this model of practice is not simple, both for practical reasons linked to cycles of programme design and implementation and due to the broader dominant development discourses that do not always incentivise learning (also see section 4).

3.3 Accountability

Theories of Change are used as a way to communicate programmes to donors and, in the process, possibly win their funding. Wigboldus and Brouwers note the importance of preventing the use of Theory of Change as a tool for mechanical compliance with external requirements as this is “exactly what a Theory of Change articulation process is meant to overcome.”⁴⁴ The “urge to be policy-relevant” may deter investigation of “alternative sets of assumptions” about the change process.⁴⁵ Such omission, Weiss argues, may create

⁴³ Interview with Sagar Prasai, Deputy Representative, The Asia Foundation, 30/10/2013.

⁴⁴ Wigboldus, S. and Brouwers, J. (2011). Rigid plan or vague vision: How precise does a ToC needs to be? *Hivos Edialogues*. Available at <http://www.hivos.nl/eng/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Themes/Theory-of-Change/Edialogues/E-dialogue-2>

⁴⁵ Wigboldus, S. and Brouwers, J. (2011).

conditions in which Theory of Change approaches allow us “to know more but understand less”.⁴⁶

One Asia Foundation employee in Timor-Leste stated that while the demand from donors to use a Theory of Change approach may have defined its use, the approach was still beneficial, arguing that it “requires us to revisit the ‘why’ of what we are doing – moving beyond outputs to impacts”.⁴⁷ Another programme director stated that “The main reason for using it is because it is the flavour of the month. We’ll do it that way because it makes sense for them...but I’m a convert as I’ve found it useful”.⁴⁸ Others in the organisation implied that the power dynamic between donors and organisations rendered Theories of Change far less useful than they might otherwise be, stating “if you take the donor out then it’s a much more solid kind of process, then you don’t need to be putting round pegs in square holes”.⁴⁹

The JSRP ‘Theories in Practice’ series of papers presents mixed information on the extent to which the Foundation’s Theories of Change were responding to donor discourses.⁵⁰ In Sri Lanka, The Asia Foundation has been supporting the Sri Lankan Ministry of Justice in its development of a country-wide form of alternative dispute resolution for over twenty years. While their early principles have remained constant – often located within an ‘access to justice’ framing – in external project documents and donor reporting, the overarching rationales for their support have been broader. At a superficial level, this critique applies across the Asia Foundation’s DfID-funded PPA programmes, since all of these were justified on the basis of improving state-society relations – a key DfID strategic focus.⁵¹

However, when we look deeper, there is often a more complex interaction between donor narratives and the claims made in Theories of Change. In the case of community mediation in Nepal, Stein argued that the expansion of these claims was at least in part linked to reports from project locations suggesting “that community mediation was contributing to a number of unforeseen changes”.⁵² In relation to The Asia Foundation’s sub-national governance programme in Timor-Leste, Rowland and Smith record that the Theory of Change had emerged “via a combination of empirical knowledge and theoretical insights of the core advisory and management staff”.⁵³ Yet, they also claim that their theory had been written by an academic advisor to the team to be “deliberately ‘abstract’ and ‘nebulous’, looking towards a ‘long-term and blue-sky vision’ of societal change for Timor”.⁵⁴ There was a recognition among the programme staff of the tension between “programme financing for a limited number of years, and the reality that all change takes longer periods of time.”⁵⁵

⁴⁶ Brodtkin, Hass and Kaufman (1995), p.25, quoted in Weiss (1995), p.87.

⁴⁷ Rowland, Nicholas and Smith, Claire Q. (2014), pp. 15-16

⁴⁸ Interview with Jaime Faustino, Programme Director, Economic Reform and Development Entrepreneurship, The Asia Foundation Philippines, 31/10/2013.

⁴⁹ Interview with Dinesha de Silva and Ramani Jayasudere, Country Director and Senior Technical Advisor respectively, The Asia Foundation Sri Lanka, 07/11/2013

⁵⁰ One conclusion, specifically from the research in Nepal and Sri Lanka, is that examining how a theory has evolved, what has shaped it and the role it plays (or does not play), may be just as important as analysing its conceptual and empirical underpinnings.

⁵¹ As one programme officer stated, “Improving state-society relations is an assumption; we don’t know how much people associate this with the government”. Interview with Radhika Abeynaike, Programme Officer, The Asia Foundation. Colombo. 20/08/2012.

⁵² Stein, D. (2013), p. 16.

⁵³ Rowland, Nicholas and Smith, Claire Q. (2014), p. 16.

⁵⁴ Rowland, Nicholas and Smith, Claire Q. (2014), pp. 16-17.

⁵⁵ Rowland, Nicholas and Smith, Claire Q. (2014), p. 17.

Clearly, there are considerable donor and government pressures to fit within particular narratives in order to operate in a country. Broad policy ideas, such as 'improving state-society relations' are socially appropriate: as Mosse highlights, these terms can "submerge ideological differences, allowing compromise, room for manoeuvre or multiple criteria of success, thus winning supporters by mediating different understandings of development".⁵⁶ The danger of accepting or using simplistic donor or NGO paradigms was accepted by many in The Asia Foundation: one programme director in the Philippines clarified that previously, they made the mistake of thinking in terms of themes - such as sustainable development and women's empowerment. For him, the real value of a Theory of Change approach is that it can force staff to be more critical about such arguments and the way change actually happens.⁵⁷

Of course, fitting within broad policy ideas may actually be the only way of getting certain more ambitious or political programmes implemented. Consider the example of reforming the police in a post-conflict context: dressing up such a programme in soft and malleable language may provide a way of ameliorating the varied pressures and expectations of donors, their publics and the governments of the country, and this may mean that the programme can get implemented, at least in some form. This is common practice in the development industry and to a certain extent understandable. Yet it can mean that Theories of Change (as well as other analysis of change processes) become 'mobilising metaphors', telling us more about how the relationship between aid donors and receiving organisations functions than how programmes operate and have wider impacts.⁵⁸

However, the existence of an ambitious Theory of Change does not necessarily mean it is due to external pressure. As one staff member argued: "If you are candid with them [donors] and tell them what you know and don't and make them part of the process, it's much more engaging for them".⁵⁹ A country representative said that being engaged with Theories of Change had less to do with direct donor pressure, than due to internal discussions with staff in their Bangkok office that this was a useful intellectual exercise.⁶⁰ For another, the Theory of Change approach represented a chance to avoid the 'low hanging fruit' and to try and explore how their programming could contribute to wider scale change.⁶¹ As Tom Parks, former Regional Director for Governance and Conflict with TAF, has argued, Theories of Change - as well as critical analysis of these theories by the JSRP - help "situate our programs in larger ecosystems of social change".⁶² The exploration of how programming can contribute to wider scale change should be applauded, with the caveat that a Theory of Change is an honest interpretation of an intervention's wider effects - if the Theory of Change is misleading then it only serves to widen the gap between policy, practice and local experiences of development interventions and processes.

What we learn, then, is that when Theories of Change are used as an accountability and funding tool this can have a corrosive effect on their honesty and usefulness, yet this does not

⁵⁶ Mosse, David. (2004). 'Is Good Policy Unimplementable? Reflection on the Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice'. *Development and Change*, 35(4), pp.639-671.

⁵⁷ Interview with Raymundo Celestino F. Habito Jr. Senior Programme Officer, Education Team, The Asia Foundation Philippines, 13/02/2013.

⁵⁸ This is highlighted in Valters, C. (2013), p. 14. drawing on Mosse, David. (2004), p. 663.

⁵⁹ Interview with Jaime Faustino, Programme Director, Economic Reform and Development Entrepreneurship, The Asia Foundation Philippines, 31/10/2013.

⁶⁰ Interview with Silas Everett, Country Representative of The Asia Foundation Cambodia, 05/11/2013.

⁶¹ Comment made by an Asia Foundation staff member at an internal workshop, July 2013.

⁶² Comment made during public conference hosted by JSRP and The Asia Foundation entitled 'Evidence and Power in Development Policy and Practice', 02/07/2013.

close off their benefits entirely; whether to play to donor narratives is a choice and it can be done to different degrees. This puts the onus on both donors and implementing organisations to create better conditions for honesty and critical reflection on assumptions.

4. The effect of development discourses

As will have become clear, these three approaches to Theory of Change exist in considerable tension. For example, the fact that Theories of Change are used both as a communication and accountability mechanism appears to affect the degree to which organisations use the approach to critically reflect on their policy and practice; in other words, “accountability trumps learning”.⁶³ The following section deepens this element of the analysis, asking how a Theory of Change approach can be affected by the results and evidence agenda. This analysis in part explains *why* it is that Theories of Change can be skewed away from their purported goal of challenging the assumptions of development actors.

While both the results and evidence agendas have their roots in reasonable expectations of how organisations can, or should, justify what they do, these related discourses can also have counter-productive effects on how development practitioners work and how Theories of Change are approached. These effects are increasingly at odds with an emergent development community that understands its practice as a political, complex and unpredictable undertaking.⁶⁴ As highlighted by the authors of the *Big Push Forward* conference report, artefacts like Theories of Change are often “underpinned by assumptions of what counts as the right kind of result or evidence...[yet] the norms and values underpinning what is considered ‘right’ are rarely, if ever, explicit”.⁶⁵

4.1 Results

The results agenda has become a pervasive part of the international development discourse. This comes under a range of monikers (although with sometimes different implications), including ‘value for money’. There are many different reasons for the agenda – to justify aid to taxpayers, to improve aid, to manage aid agencies, to manage complexity.⁶⁶ These are each reasonable motives and trying to understand what aid organisations do and do not achieve is an essential endeavour. However, this agenda has been criticised by Denney and Domingo for being a “dominant objective in itself rather than informing improved programming on the ground”.⁶⁷ Equally, managing for pre-determined results to achieve greater accountability often privileges linear cause-and-effect thinking over a more responsive ‘going with the flow’

⁶³ As discussed in Whitty, B. (2013). Experiences of the Results Agenda: Draft findings for discussion from the crowd-sourcing survey. The Big Push Forward, p. ii.

⁶⁴ Carothers, Thomas and De Gramont, Diane. (2013). *Development Aid Confronts Politics: The Almost Revolution*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Jones, H. (2011). 'Taking responsibility for complexity: how implementation can achieve results in the face of complex problems', Working Paper 330, London: Overseas Development Institute; Andrews, Matt, Pritchett, Lant and Woolcock, Michael. (2012) Escaping Capability Traps through Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA). Working Paper 299. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development; Booth, David. (2012). Development as a collective action problem: Addressing the real challenges of African governance. Africa Power and Politics Programme. London: ODI.

⁶⁵ Big Push Forward. (2013).

⁶⁶ Barder, Owen. (2012), What are the results agenda? Blog Post on Owen Aborad, February 10th 2012 (<http://www.owen.org/blog/5228>).

⁶⁷ Denney, Lisa and Domingo, Pilar. (2013). *The politics of practice: security and justice programming in FCAS: Expert meeting on justice and security*. Overseas Development Institute, p. 7

programmatic approach.⁶⁸ The debate here should not be about whether we want to see 'results' – most people do and that makes sense – it is more about how results can be obtained (and measured) without adverse effects, and indeed what 'result' is even pursued.⁶⁹

For some, Theory of Change provides an opportunity to give nuance to such linear or results-based thinking in development.⁷⁰ Vogel argues that,

In tension with the drive for more assurance of results, there is a growing recognition of the complexities, ambiguities and uncertainties of development work, involving complex political and social change in dynamic country contexts. Theory of change thinking is viewed as one approach to help people deal positively with the challenges of complexity.⁷¹

Part of the reason for this is that Theories of Change are often perceived as a way to move away from the rigid templates associated with the logframe approach. Several Asia Foundation staff members commented on the inappropriateness of linear and quantitative results models.⁷² For example, staff argued that “logframes are only useful for the donor, not for us”,⁷³ and “logframes are too strict, too rigid as you have to show things on very short time horizons”.⁷⁴ In the Philippines, one staff member stated:

We took on the Theory of Change approach from the start. We would not explore results based management or a logframe approach. We didn't think these tools would be appropriate for this kind of project since it required flexibility, and a primarily qualitative way of measuring progress.⁷⁵

The deputy representative of the Nepal office argued that “in logframes, external factors are called assumptions as if they don't matter. With Theory of Change the assumption is brought into the narrative of the theory...it might appear trivial but it is a big deal when trying to manage development programmes”.⁷⁶ A senior technical advisor in the Sri Lanka office stated that

I can think of so many times we have developed logframes and crafted indicators to measure results without a sound focus on recognising and highlighting actual change. Most of the time it's the nature of the work I guess, where development initiatives are heavily time bound and few people are really interested in or have the luxury of documenting long term change...!⁷⁷

⁶⁸ Eyben, R. (2006) 'Making relationships matter for aid bureaucracies' in R. Eyben (ed.) *Relationships for Aid*, London: Earthscan.

⁶⁹ Green, Duncan. (2013). So What do I take Away from The Great Evidence Debate? Final thoughts (for now). From Poverty to Power Blog, 7th February 2013. Available at <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/so-what-do-i-take-away-from-the-great-evidence-debate-final-thoughts-for-now/>

⁷⁰ Retolaza, I. (2011). *Theory of Change: A thinking and action approach to navigate in the complexity of social change processes*. Hivos/UNDP/Democratic Dialogue, p. 3

⁷¹ Vogel, I. (2012), p. 8

⁷² CARE (2012).

⁷³ Interview with Mukesh Khanal, Programme Officer, The Asia Foundation Nepal, 11/11/2013

⁷⁴ Interview with Preeti Thapa, Senior Programme Officer, The Asia Foundation. Conducted by Danielle Stein.

⁷⁵ Focus group with Programme Staff, The Asia Foundation Philippines, 07/11/2013

⁷⁶ Interview with Sagar Prasai, Deputy Representative, The Asia Foundation, 30/10/2013.

⁷⁷ Email correspondence with Ramani Jayasundere, Senior Technical Adviser, The Asia Foundation, Colombo.

These reflections indicate the hopefulness with which some staff view the Theories of Change approach. Many practitioners, inside The Asia Foundation and out, relish the chance to explore their interventions in more depth than most monitoring and evaluation approaches offer.

There is a danger, however, that Theories of Change seem to have a high chance of becoming as standardised, mandatory and limiting as many argue that the logframe approach has become. In a major review of the 'use and abuse' of the logframe approach by Intrac, it was argued that one positive element of the approach was that "it forces development actors to think through the relationship between where they want to go (the impact) and what they are going to do (the inputs and activities), and the intermediate steps on the way".⁷⁸ This sounds eerily familiar to what many feel is positive about a Theory of Change approach. As Rick Davies has noted, the logical framework approach was originally a separate exercise to filling in the logframe table, but this was reduced into a table due to the structure and working practices of the aid business.⁷⁹ The problem here is less that a Theory of Change approach could be standardised in itself, and more that it could become standardised in a way that closes down space for critical thought, rather than opening it up. This may well happen as it seems, for some, that the logframe and Theory of Change approaches appear to be in part driven by the same ideology that assumes you can plot relatively clear or stable change pathways in complex environments. In one of the few other reviews of the Theory of Change approach by CARE, the potential problems are made clear: "Theories of change [can] encourage an overly linear approach, when change in conflict contexts can be more organic or systemic".⁸⁰

During a workshop between the JSRP and The Asia Foundation in June 2014, some staff members argued that making the discussion about 'logframes versus Theories of Change' was an unhelpful way of presenting the problem.⁸¹ Principally, it was argued that we may well need them both, but for different purposes. Under a programme where change pathways are relatively clear or stable, it was argued, a logframe may be an appropriate tool. Yet in another, where implementers expect to adapt their practice iteratively based on changing context or learning, a Theory of Change approach may be more useful. Logically, this makes sense, but it raises the question: how often can implementers take this 'pick and choose' approach? It is more likely that donors will require a logframe and that a Theory of Change will be seen as an add-on. In that scenario, another question might be: can the requirement of a logframe skew the opportunity for truly reflective thinking through a Theory of Change approach? Presumably, these two approaches will need to match in their analysis and that can create constraints on the transformational learning goals of Theories of Change.

As Zaira Drammis argues: "Like any tool, Theory of Change can be good or bad, useful or not; it needs to be used critically".⁸² In one respect, this can be viewed as an opportunity: there is still some freedom for individuals and organisations to define their own Theory of Change approach, to use it as a much needed space to explore context and complexity – something The Asia Foundation has done to some extent in different offices. However, the danger is that Theories of Change change little in the everyday practice of organisations,

⁷⁸ Bakewell, O. and Garbutt, A. (2005). The use and abuse of the logical framework approach. INTRAC.

⁷⁹ Green, Duncan. (2012). Theories of change = logframes on steroids? A discussion with DFID, Blog Post on From Poverty to Power, 14th May 2012, Available at <http://www.oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/?p=10071>

⁸⁰ CARE. (2012).

⁸¹ Notes on file with author.

⁸² Comment made during public conference hosted by JSRP and The Asia Foundation entitled 'Evidence and Power in Development Policy and Practice', 02/07/2013.

particularly if the logframe approach still dominates. For Theories of Change to be meaningful, there seems to be a need for an acceptance of multiple possible Theories of Change and for these to be seen as hypotheses (not ‘theories’) that need to be adapted over time according to new events and information.

4.2 Evidence

Closely related to the results agenda is the increased drive for providing ‘evidence’ in development programmes.⁸³ At face value it is clear why this increased drive is desirable: who would want policy or practice not to be based on evidence? Good data is important for grounding programming in an understanding of complex socio-political realities in-country, as well as demonstrating the effects of those programmes.⁸⁴ The push by donors to look closely at evidence in part defined the JSRP’s general approach to analysing Theories of Change; we began with a tacit assumption that a ‘good’ Theory of Change would be well-evidenced, based on diverse sources and long-term primary research.

However, the apparent common-sense-appeal to get and use the best evidence available belies underlying complexities relating to how evidence can be constructed and used in political and ideological ways. In international development circles, ‘evidence’ has acquired a particular meaning relating to ‘what works’ – a narrow discourse in which the ‘how’ of context and process is ignored.⁸⁵ It may often be the case that evidence is generated to validate certain policy narratives rather than as a foundation for planning interventions and building such narratives. Such issues should not imply that what counts as good evidence is an entirely subjective matter; but they should encourage a reflective and critical approach to evidence.⁸⁶

The guidance material on Theories of Change is unclear as to whether evidence should be used in Theories of Change at all.⁸⁷ This lack of clarity partly comes down to the purpose of Theories of Change: are they simply uncovered assumptions or are they substantial theories developed from empirical research? For the former, the role of evidence is unclear, however for the latter, the types of evidence used to substantiate a claim and the ways this is collected will be central to validating a theory.

The question of what constitutes evidence and how this relates to Theories of Change is an ongoing discussion within the JSRP and Asia Foundation collaboration, as well as within the development industry more broadly. During an annual Asia Foundation workshop, one staff member compared evidence in programming to evidence in court, urging consideration of the concept of procedural rules for the use and gathering of evidence that determines whether something is admissible in an attempt to build the strongest possible case. This was premised on the idea that anything appears to count as evidence in development. However, this legal analogy may not be the best one for research and policy in international development. First, there *are* some (both formal and informal) rules for what constitutes evidence in development. The problem is that this is often what can be easily counted; an issue that some proponents see Theories of Change as addressing. Second, a lawyer looks selectively for

⁸³ Schomerus, Mareike. (2014). ‘Making the evidence agenda in development more plausible’, Justice and Security Research Programme Blog Post, 23rd January 2014, Available at <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/jsrp/2014/01/23/making-the-evidence-agenda-in-development-more-plausible/>

⁸⁴ Denney, Lisa and Domingo, Pilar. (2013), p. 7.

⁸⁵ Eyben, R. (2013). Uncovering the Politics of Evidence and Results. The Big Push Forward.

⁸⁶ Valters, C. (2013), p. 7. The JSRP has conducted a number of in-depth evidence reviews of the literature on conflict, climate change, security and more. See here more details: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/jsrp/publications/>

⁸⁷ Stein and Valters (2012).

evidence to build a case, discarding evidence that does not fit. This may be a dangerous way to design a project or do research. A better approach would be to review all available evidence, then generate some more, and then consider which way it points.⁸⁸

When writing their Theories of Change, all country offices clearly felt the need to provide some form of evidence for the claims they made, or to highlight some amount of uncertainty where they felt it was required. There does not appear to have been a systematic approach to the use of evidence in the Theories of Change. This being the case, practitioners need to be wary of collecting, generating or presenting evidence to validate certain policy narratives rather than gathering empirical data for planning interventions and building such narratives. This practice existed to different degrees across the different offices, often linked to ongoing practices of management and learning, to how long the programme had been running, as well as to the perceived need to make a programme more appealing to funders through the use of current buzzwords.

However, while researchers, policymakers and practitioners can proclaim the need for an evidence-based Theory of Change supporting each intervention, often practitioners will not have the time and money to make that happen; in fact, it may be that thinking of Theories of Change in this way may not be the most useful model. A Theory of Change approach can encourage further empirical investigation into a hypothesis generated through existing research and the lived experiences of practitioners. Yet the underlying idea behind it - of questioning assumptions and acknowledging complexity - leads itself to a more iterative, uncertain approach; an approach that, subsequent to the collaboration, the Foundation appears to be pursuing across various programmes. A Theory of Change approach may actually work best when it aims to iteratively capture the lived experiences of practitioners – particularly if they are updated on reflection of changing data, ongoing research and reflections on their practice. In this sense, a Theory of Change approach can lead an organisation towards more systematic programming and project design, even if it has not yet got the ‘right’ theory in place supported by strong evidence.⁸⁹ This points to the importance of understanding Theories of Change as an approach, as a way of working, rather than simply as a static ‘evidence document’ which is given to various stakeholders.

Part of the problem is that Theory of Change approaches are being pulled in multiple directions, reflecting the general bureaucratic malaise in which aid organisations find themselves. The demand for results and evidence often prioritises ways of communicating, learning and being held accountable through quantitative and linear models. Part of the challenge for the Theory of Change approach, in the context of the discourse of results and evidence, is making this more uncertain and reflective approach into something that is valued in the wider development community. Its ability to challenge existing policies and practice is currently hampered by the fact that it functions as a results and evidence artefact, pushing it away from learning and towards accountability.

5. Rethinking the Theory of Change approach

This final section provides some key findings and suggests ways in which debates on the policy and practice of Theories of Change can be moved forward, if it is to genuinely encourage critical reflection on assumptions about development interventions. Whatever

⁸⁸ Thanks to David Lewis for this point.

⁸⁹ Thanks to David Lewis for this point.

Theories of Change proponents wish it to be, the tool cannot be divorced from the existing systems and contexts to which it is introduced. However, this is true of any tool or artefact introduced into development policy and practice, so the question has been to what extent can the Theory of Change approach itself create more space *than usual* for critical reflection on the assumptions underpinning interventions?

5.1 Six key findings

A Theory of Change approach can create space for critical reflection, but there is a danger that this is an illusory process

Many have welcomed the introduction of a Theory of Change approach, specifically because it provides space for reflection on their assumptions and the context in which they work, particularly in comparison to logframes. Such attempts to situate programmes in larger ecosystems of social change should be applauded, not dismissed. Yet a Theory of Change approach can also create an illusion of serious reflection by being a superficial process of critical thought, where people who engage with the theories (donors as well as implementers) do not actually reflect sufficiently on how power dynamics change in practice and how local people see change happen.⁹⁰

Personalities matter—they change whether a Theory of Change is seen as a tool of communication, learning, or a method of securing funding, or some combination of these.

The existing organisational approach to new tools and the individual agency (understood as the personal views and actions) of those within these organisations will change how the approach is used. The way in which The Asia Foundation used Theories of Change reflects both how their international management asked that it be used, as well as the existing practices of each country office. Beyond this, it is clear that this occurs, in part, because of a lack of clarity more broadly on what a Theory of Change approach entails. As highlighted by Whitty, how such tensions are resolved and perceptions play out depends on how an artefact is communicated, managed and tailored to its context.⁹¹ What this means is that changing an organisation's approach may require considerable personal and organisational investment (and potentially risk) in convincing all staff to critically analyse interventions.

Power relations between donors and implementers in the international development industry discourage critical reflection and therefore constrain Theory of Change approaches

The tendency to view a Theory of Change as predominantly an upward accountability mechanism considerably constrains attempts to learn from the process. While using Theory of Change as a way to encourage critical reflection may be the most useful and important approach to take, as Ramalingam notes, “the knowledge and learning agenda is just one among many voices pressing for change and adaptation within development agencies”.⁹² This includes the demands for ‘results’ made by donors. This needs to become a core part of a Theory of Change approach; a recognition that the process and product is hamstrung by the power dynamics of the sector, and to use the approach as an opportunity to open up a space for honesty and critical reflection. Equally, the content of a Theory of Change approach itself

⁹⁰ As noted by the Big Push Forward (2013), “Uncritical use of preferred tools can short-circuit thinking and obscure the lack of clarity of what exactly it is you are trying to understand.”

⁹¹ Whitty, B. (2013), p.iii

⁹² Ramalingam, Ben. (2004). Implementing Knowledge Strategies: Lessons from international development agencies. Working Paper 244

also needs to be more explicitly related to the power relations and politics that the intervention is aiming to work with, or shift, and needs to be based on a serious reflection of how local people feel about the interventions and the changes that might be set in motion.

A Theory of Change approach needs to focus on process rather than product, uncertainty rather than results, iterative development of hypotheses rather than static theories, and learning rather than accountability.

In this way Theories of Change can be part of a challenge to the more negative effects of results-based performance management systems; but not if they are dominated by preferred, linear cause-and-effect models of management that are often inappropriate for the kind of changes development organisations are trying to achieve. Discussions with one advisor within DfID highlighted a strong awareness that this shift was required; yet within DfID itself there are various institutional and individual perspectives which may clash on this issue. Donors are also subject to government demands to demonstrate 'results' that often remains mired in the problem of counting successes, rather than exploring and explaining change. Governments and donors therefore have a key role to play here in changing the terms of the debate: if Theories of Change are to be required by them, then they need to increase the institutional incentives for reflective critical thought to become the norm.

Politically expedient Theories of Change may be useful, but are unlikely to encourage critical reflection

The political context in which the organisation is operating may limit or open up space for deeper critical reflection. Organisations may be used to framing their work in ways that appear technical and unchallenging to power and the political status quo, and this will feed into their approach to Theories of Change, particularly since they may become public documents. As Tom Parks (Regional Director for Governance and Conflict at the time) argued, there are drivers of change in the countries in which the Foundation works that "we simply can't write down".⁹³ Of course, politically expedient or simplistic Theories of Change have their uses: to please donors, to facilitate working with skeptical governments, to build consensus among teams on varying goals. But what they are unlikely to do is encourage serious critical reflection on the underlying assumptions for an intervention, which is what Theories of Change set out to do. When such an approach is taken, there is also a danger that evidence is used selectively to build a pre-defined Theory of Change. In The Asia Foundation's Philippines office, where they did not need to make their Theories of Change public, staff were unequivocal that the internal process was helpful: "It has been useful and can be very effective for clarifying and understanding; the caveat is because we never have to publish it".⁹⁴

If the aim is to encourage critical reflection and learning, the use of Theories of Change should be supported only so long as they remain useful in that respect

Carlsson and Wohlgemuth identify five key issues obstructing system-wide learning in development: political constraints; the unequal nature of aid relations; problems internal to the organisation of the aid agencies; organisations and capacities on the recipient side; and

⁹³ Comment made during public conference hosted by JSRP and The Asia Foundation entitled 'Evidence and Power in Development Policy and Practice', 02/07/2013.

⁹⁴ Interview with Jaime Faustino, Programme Director, Economic Reform and Development Entrepreneurship, The Asia Foundation Philippines, 31/10/2013.

the sources and quality of knowledge. This study has reaffirmed many of these.⁹⁵ The value of Theory of Change is in its ability to create a space to negotiate some of these challenges, but should that space be closed off then the approach is likely to produce analysis of a dubious or deceptive quality. Across the many workshops associated with the JSRP and The Asia Foundation collaboration, it became clear that no one felt particularly wedded to the use of Theories of Change *per se*. There was a commitment to a broader reflective approach to development practice, rather than to any given tool that might well fade away at some point. In this respect it may be worth anchoring Theory of Change approaches to other useful concepts and practices, such as that of problem-driven iterative adaptation⁹⁶ or single and double loop learning.

5.2 Conclusion

The Theory of Change approach is becoming a pervasive part of development practice: as an artefact, as a management tool, and increasingly as a common discourse which implementers use to explain and explore their interventions. This paper has looked at Theories of Change through the three ways in which The Asia Foundation use them: communication, learning, and accountability. Though these various approaches reflect the everyday needs and pressures faced by the organisation and by project teams, this paper has demonstrated how different offices balanced these issues differently depending on a range of factors: some bureaucratic, some organisational, some political. The practitioners engaged with in this study have largely welcomed the opportunity Theories of Change provide, often arguing that the approach has considerable value as a space to reflect on their assumptions. However, the Theory of Change process interacts with, and is subject to, a range of political, organisational and bureaucratic forces which can restrain its transformational goals.

It is clear that the way in which Theories of Change are approached is closely related to the prevailing development discourses of 'results' and 'evidence'. With this comes a considerable danger that the approach will privilege a linear cause and effect narrative of change. There appear to be two schools of thought on the direction of Theories of Change: one which seeks to use the tool to expand our understanding of change contexts, and another which views them as a "logframe on steroids".⁹⁷ As a DFID adviser highlighted, there appears to be a rather profound scepticism about the former winning out, given that Theories of Change have "become another corporate stick to beat people with" which is often not "helpful in terms of changing behavior".⁹⁸ The onus is therefore on likeminded donors, implementers and researchers to build a case for a critical, honest and reflective approach, which takes the complexity of social change seriously.

⁹⁵ Carlsson, J. and Wohlgemuth, L. (eds). (1999) Learning in Development Co-operation, Stockholm: Almqvist and Wikse ll International.

⁹⁶ Andrews, Matt, Pritchett, Lant and Woolcock, Michael. (2012).

⁹⁷ Green, D. Theories of Change = Logframes on Steroids. From Poverty to Power Blog. Available at <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/theories-of-change-logframes-on-steroids-a-discussion-with-dfid/>

⁹⁸ Interview with DFID staff member, 12/12/2013.

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This publication is an output of a research programme funded by UK aid from the UK Government. However, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies



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The Justice and Security Research Programme is an international consortium of research partners, undertaking work on end-user experiences of justice and security in conflict-affected areas. The London School of Economics and Political Science is the lead organisation and is working in partnership with:

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