Thematic Brief

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THE BASICS OF IMPLEMENTING A THEORY OF CHANGE

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INTRODUCTION

In the past, most projects have included a Logical Framework that set out the goals to be reached, activities to be carried out and the measures of success (indicators and means of verification). The Logical Framework places limited emphasis on the inter-relationships between different project components. Likewise, Logical Frameworks tend to insufficiently identify an underlying Theory of Change that takes all of the contextual factors into account. Such contextual factors may be economic, social, cultural, political and take place at macro, meso and micro levels. The "Theory of Change approach" was developed to address these challenges and provide a more integrated and well-reasoned approach to development.

"A Theory of Change is a specific and measurable description of a social change initiative that forms the basis for:
- strategic planning
- on-going decision-making
- evaluation."[1]

A Theory of Change describes all of the inter-locking components that need to be in place—and functioning well—in order to achieve a development goal. Theory of Change elements are organised in a "pathway of change" or "change framework". This often looks like an organisation chart or a type of map that is a graphic representation of the expected change process that will lead to the desired goal.

Each part of the pathway of change describes an essential aspect to consider in successfully bringing about change. Key stakeholders need to be involved in identifying the different components and steps to ensure that they are feasible in the local context and are most likely to lead to the accomplishment of results. Stakeholders should join together to develop a common vision of the long-term goals, how these will be reached, and to determine which measures will be used to track progress.

BASIC THEORY OF CHANGE DESIGN STEPS

1) Identifying Outcomes and Assumptions

As a first step, concerned stakeholders meet to identify, discuss, and agree on the long-term goal(s) to be achieved. A study of the existing situation preferably precedes this step.

Stakeholders develop a graphic showing the conditions that need to be in place for the goal to be attained. These are assumptions, also referred to as "pre-conditions", that have to be true for identified outcomes to be achieved.

2) Backwards Mapping

Starting with the basic map, stakeholders work backwards to identify the parts that are needed to achieve the final goal in greater detail. In this step, stakeholders thus need to specifically identify *what* it will take to achieve the desired goal. This usually involves a great deal of discussion among the stakeholders, which can also take much time. If well managed, it is a healthy process to ensure that there is high clarity and that the logic underlying the Theory of Change is well-reasoned, explicit, and in line with realities.

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[1] Information in brief partially based on information obtained from http://www.theoryofchange.org/. Accessed 6 August, 2015.

3) Developing Indicators
Indicators are identified that will help to measure the extent to which you are reaching your results. Each indictor needs to state: who is concerned, how many and how much of the result has to be reached to be able to say that the result has been achieved. A time limit within which the result has to be reached also has to be indicated.

4) Determining interventions (actions)
Until step 4, the focus has been on identifying the desired outcomes (results), the pre-conditions that have to be met to reach those outcomes, and how you will determine if you have really reached your goal(s). It is now time to decide what and how you will implement activities that will bring about the greatest chance that you will reach your change goal(s). It is also time to go back repeatedly to check if what you have done until stage 4 still makes sense. You need to ask various questions now, for example, if you do intervention X will it really lead to desired outcome Y? Or maybe the outcome you wanted to achieve turns out not to be realistic (feasible) given the kinds of resources you have to implement the needed actions?

An important part of identifying the most useful interventions is also making sure that they will contribute in an integrated way towards achieving your overall goal(s). Maybe you identify an intervention that will help you achieve a lower level output but it does not really work well enough to create synergies with all of the outcomes. An example could be developing a template for labour contracts for informal economy workers. Such a template could help lead to reaching an outcome to increase decent work conditions. If, however, the project is primarily intended to strengthen the livelihoods of women market sellers with no workers in their business, the logic is not true. They obviously do not need templates of labour contracts for non-existent workers. In such a case, it is wiser to focus on improving the physical occupational safety and health conditions in the market to improve decent work of the market women. While such a situation may seem unlikely to arise in the development of a Theory of Change, in practice many such instances may occur so constant cross-checking of the continued logic and coherence is vital.

5) Writing the narrative
In steps 1-4, the whole Theory of Change process has still been expressed primarily in a visual graphic that shows the linkages between the different parts of the Theory of Change. In step 5 a narrative text is written describing the Theory of Change in paragraphs. Stakeholders "are forced to take a step back from the intellectual abstraction of boxes, arrows and numbers and translate their initiative into normal language".[2] The narrative helps ensure once more that all of the different elements make sense and helps stakeholders explain their Theory of Change to outsiders. At this stage you may still identify some gaps that you did not sufficiently address in your Theory of Change.

6) Implement
You are now ready to implement your Theory of Change. It is important to remain open to external factors that can influence how you implement our actions. Be open to opportunities that may arise that will help you maximise the attainment of your goal(s). Do not be afraid to make adjustments if unexpected challenges in the environment arise.

7) Monitor and revise
Be aware that you will be testing your Theory of Change as you implement it. It is not a straight jacket (or tight corset) that confines you but rather is a guide towards achieving and measuring the extent to which you have reached your goals. You may well find that some of the ideas contained in your Theory of Change are not realistic in practice. In such cases, be open to revising the content through additional discussion with key stakeholders.

8) Evaluate and feedback into new initiatives
At the end of the implementation of your project you will need to verify if you Theory of Change was true and you have reached your goals. You—and any evaluators who are involved—will check if you were successful and met your goal(s), whether the pre-conditions were met, and if your indicators were ultimately valid.

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[2] Adapted from Act Knowledge (2003), Guided Example: Project Superwomen.
http://capacity4dev.ec.europa.eu/iesf/document/guided-example-theory-change-application. (Website accessed August, 2015)

CRITIQUE OF THE THEORY OF CHANGE

Critics have listed some points for consideration when deciding to do a Theory of Change, or even if one should be done at all:

1) Developing a good Theory of Change is time consuming and requires the involvement of key stakeholders who are committed to developing an effective pathway to change. It should be noted that, at the same time, the high level of commitment needed for the development of the Theory of Change also increases the sense of ownership of the process. This sense of ownership helps ensure greater interest in implementing actions well and may also contribute to higher levels of sustainability.

2) Stakeholders often forget—or are unwilling—to revisit their Theory of Change due to time constraints or unwillingness to question their earlier work (as already stated). A common critique of the Theory of Change approach is thus that designers are hesitant to make changes for two reasons. The first is because stakeholders have put a great deal of time and effort into preparing their Theory of Change and are hesitant to admit that it was not perfect. The second is because they fear donors and/or government will criticise them for not adhering strictly to their Theory of Change. The first challenge can be addressed by clearly recognising from the beginning that the Theory of Change is not static and that stakeholders may need to revisit it and make changes in line with realities. The second challenge may be addressed by negotiating from the outset with donors and the government (or other decision-makers) to ensure that they understand that changes may be necessary.

3) Stakeholders often forget to sufficiently take external factors into account that may influence how well they can implement their Theory of Change. As one author indicated, "The best theories of change explicitly integrate the anticipated actions of regulators, the work of peer organizations, expected changes in the economic climate, and other factors."[1]

IESF TEAM SUGGESTED RESOURCES

ActKnowledge (2003), Guided Example: Project Superwomen.

http://capacity4dev.ec.europa.eu/iesf/document/guided-example-theory-change-application. (Website accessed August, 2015)

Stanford Social Innovation Review (2015), Six Theory of Change Pitfalls to Avoid. Available from:

http://ssir.org/articles/entry/six_theory_of_change_pitfalls_to_avoid. Accessed 1 October, 2015.

Taplin, D. H.; Clark, H. (2012) Theory of Change Basics: A Primer on Theory of Change, ActKnowledge

Theory to Results. http://capacity4dev.ec.europa.eu/iesf/document/theory-change-basics-what-it-and-how-use-it

Valters, C. (2014) Theories of Change in International Development: Communication, Learning, or

Accountability? JSRP Paper 17. The Justice and Security Research Programme, The Asia Foundation.

http://capacity4dev.ec.europa.eu/iesf/document/critical-analysis-theories-change-international-development

For further details and useful tools to develop a theory of change, please see;

http://www.theoryofchange.org/

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[1] Stanford Social Innovation Review (2015), Six Theory of Change Pitfalls to Avoid. Available from: http://ssir.org/articles/entry/six_theory_of_change_pitfalls_to_avoid. Accessed 1 October, 2015.