ToC Notes 1

What is the purpose of a Theory of Change?[1]
A reflection note coming from the Hivos ToC action-learning community[2]

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Different uses for different purposes

The term "Theory of Change" (TOC) is understood and practiced in different ways: from a more structured and semi-linear planning tool used in the context of a development project to a more flexible and emergent process thinking logic applied to social change processes. This means that the application of ToC goes from an instrumental use on one end of the scale to a transformational practice on the other end. In practice, it will often be a mix within this range, with different and adapted purposes for each application.

Before engaging with a ToC process, being clear about purpose is crucial. From the group's collective experience with Theory of Change in different contexts, three generic, complementary purposes have emerged. The prominence of these purposes in a particular ToC process will strongly shape the topics, sessions, facilitation and effects.

Three levels of purpose

A transformative purpose

In its use of TOC, the Hivos action-learning community is driven by a transformational intention. We invest in ToC processes out of a conviction that this strengthens our work for more socially and environmentally just futures, which requires bringing people together and spanning different worldviews and interests. A ToC approach is consistent with our profound conviction that human rights should drive all our thinking and action. These societal change processes engage directly with power dynamics and seek a (more) just use and distribution of (limited) resources. Putting this perspective up front in any ToC application can, we believe, strengthen the core sense of purpose for everyone involved.

Strategic focus

Our starting point is the multi-stakeholder nature of social change processes. Inevitably, therefore, we will be working with like-minded people and organizations, and those with different views. Inviting diverse people to work towards a common purpose is difficult. For many different reasons, such efforts commonly fall short of the collaborative 'miracle' we are seeking.

Within these stakeholder processes, our departing premise is that shared meaning allows for coordinated action; hence the need to invest in generating shared meaning. We assume that a successful collaborative effort needs to continually nurture a shared understanding about reality and pathways towards changing it. However, this does not mean that everyone agrees. Engaging in multi-stakeholder processes that deal constructively with complex and often conflictual processes brings together diverse views on reality, all equally valid. Once people agree enough to have some common ground from which to start, we believe it becomes easier to undertake coordinated action in the context we are seeking to change.

Part of this task means promoting safe spaces and processes among actors with different views where they can meet, share, debate and agree on ways of believing, seeing and doing. This lays the basis for sustaining collaborative action-learning and coming to more synergies.

Particularly important is ensuring that a ToC process helps to surface and honestly examine contested worldviews, interests and intentions. This is especially significant in those situations where our minds are 'colonized' by dominant narratives, practices, and norms in ways we do not even see. Such unconscious dominance of ideas can exist among indigenous marginalized women in the South as well as educated men in the West. So, a strategic use of ToC should help those involved, including ToC facilitators, develop a capacity for critical thinking and self-awareness as a way to develop alternative understandings about the causes of today's problems and options for tomorrow's solutions.

But what tools do we have for promoting robust and safe spaces and processes in which multiple stakeholders can accomplish a shared meaning and coordinated action?

Operational clarity

With clarity about values and strategies, it becomes possible to take a good look at the capacities needed to develop, support and/or fund interventions. Programmes and projects focus not only on intended changes and the people whose lives we want to help transform; but also on how the change agents can safely learn, unlearn and collaborate. Change agents can also include organisations, agencies and individuals with a vested interest in maintaining power and knowledge inequalities. Working with them means rethinking how projects and programmes can be best designed and managed.

At the operational level, a Theory of Change analysis is a planning, monitoring, and learning process that helps stakeholders to review their individual and shared assumptions about how desired social change happens; and to assess to what extent the conditions for success are in place. Therefore, a useful Theory of Change process helps us revise and be accountable for our own and others' role in order to be more efficient and effective in our work. In concrete terms, we use Theory of Change to:

- Plan joint action for a common purpose based on shared sense making
- Clarify the purpose of an organization and its strategic choices and modus operandi
- Evaluate the understanding of a given change processes
- Align actions under a common purpose and increasing the connection of/ between actions
- Understanding what change is taking place, what does it mean for end beneficiaries.

These steps can be achieved at different stages of an intervention/initiative:

- In an existing programme, for improving and alignment
- In a starting programme, for analysis, design and planning
- In an evaluation, for reviewing an existing/closing programme
- In an after action review, to understand what worked and why and whether it might work in a different context.

Operationally, a ToC would include discussions, diagrams and narratives about (Vogel 2012):

1. "Context for the initiative, including social, political and environmental conditions, the current state of the problem the project is seeking to influence and other actors able to influence change;
2. Long-term change that the initiative seeks to support - and for whose ultimate benefit;
3. Process/sequence of change anticipated to lead to the desired long-term outcome;
4. Assumptions about how these changes might happen, as a check on whether the activities and outputs are appropriate for influencing change in the desired direction in this context."

Challenges for effective use of Theory of Change

As a result of our action-learning community reflection process regarding the use of ToC to improve Hivos' support to social change organisations worldwide, new and old challenges came up that need to be explored further.

How best to promote collaborative multi-stakeholder thinking and action?

When using a ToC approach as a way to manage constructively multi-stakeholder initiatives, we (individuals as well as institutions) need to assess the capacity required o support these processes. We also want to assess and build credibility and legitimacy among key stakeholders in order to be accepted as valid and useful actors in the game. Only then we'll be able to convince different actors to come together in a safe space supported by us.

How to reduce 'business as usual'?

Many of those working in transformational processes are confronted with the difficulty of balancing the everyday pressure to deliver short-term tangible outcomes and products, and long-term strategic thinking and action. These pressures can bring about resistance and hinder innovation. How can we overcome dysfunctional cultural and organizational habits that create internal resistance to change?

How to balance free-flow thinking and action with formality?

Flexible programme/project management procedures are needed to deal constructively with the complexity of the contexts and change processes in which transformational development is located. Planning and implementation will inevitably be more emergent and flexible. But how can we do this without falling into unproductive and unaccountable activism?

How to deal with funding institutions?

From a critical thinking perspective, aid and development cooperation institutions reproduce (post)colonial relationships of domination and exclusion. How to stand up to the pressure of external funding agencies that require protocols, procedures and ideas that do not necessarily align with our core convictions? How can we help to re-shape these institutions to make them more democratic, meaningful, transparent, and supportive of the social changes needed in the world?

How to get serious about the personal dimension of change?

Historically, development discourse and practice has avoided bringing in the personal dimension into the picture. Change was needed 'out there', and challenging personal beliefs and practices has not always been prominent. Robert Chambers' plea to be self-critical has received polite nods without serious pursuit by many. Feminism has long told us 'the personal is political' but how can the political also become personal? Looking at our convictions deeply touches our identities and securities. How do we integrate inner work into ToC practice in ways that require us to rethink our development discourse and practice?