

ToC Notes 2

How to facilitate a ToC process and help to develop ToC capacities?¹

A reflection note coming from the Hivos ToC action-learning group²

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Introduction

These Notes are based on our collective experiences in facilitating diverse Theory of Change (ToC) processes – short, long, theoretical, practical, for planning, monitoring and/or evaluation. In general, facilitating a ToC process means enabling participants to take part effectively in a critical thought process. All basic good facilitation practice guidelines apply.

In this Note, we focus specifically on *ToC* facilitation. The Note shares our experiences on what is required for a good ToC process, what type of ToC capacity can be strengthened and what capacity is required to be a good facilitator. ToC facilitation aims to strengthen ToC capacity. ‘ToC capacity’ is the ability of people to apply ToC thinking in ways that help them in their daily practice to reflect on and adopt more effective strategies. This Note also provide practical guidelines for ToC facilitation.

Build on existing thinking, assumptions and living process

Facilitating a ToC process requires sufficient time to examine and reflect on grounded experiences. So ToC facilitation should start by acknowledging what ToC practice and (ToC) reflective capacity exists among participants. The team, organisation or network already has tacit, implicit thinking about how change happens and about their own role in change processes. Recognising and acknowledging existing understanding motivates people.

Assumptions are a critical element in a ToC process (see Note 3 on assumptions). Investing time in articulating a ToC makes explicit the values and assumptions held by individuals and the team as a whole. The underlying values, whether conscious or unconscious, are important drivers of everyone’s work, including ToC facilitators. By exploring and articulating values and assumptions, people come to a deeper understanding of their ToC. People may start to formulate assumptions which they were unaware of before, assumptions about initial outcomes of their actions and how these initial outcomes will eventually contribute to intermediary outcomes. But assumptions

¹ This reflection note is one of the results of the learning retreat held by the Hivos ToC action-learning group in Soesterberg (Netherlands) on September 13-14, 2012.

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also surface about what other actors will or won't do, or how factors such as climate change or political (in)stability around them will affect the change process.

A ToC thought process means on-going inquiry and revisiting documents, viewing them as living products. A good ToC practice will lead to changes in thinking about strategies, partners, impacts – as well as the documented visualisations and narratives. So, a ToC document is always work in progress. We recommend not aiming for a comprehensive, final and 'perfect' ToC (which does not exist) but rather emphasising the need to adjust the ToC as implementation and learning take place.

What do we mean by ToC capacity?

We understand 'capacity development' as being a continual institutional change process that occurs irrespective of external actors. A facilitator can, therefore, at most support or activate capacity development.

ToC capacity consists of a combination of specific abilities that allow people to practice ToC thinking. It involves strategic thinking, being able to use analytical tools appropriately, being aware of one's own limited perspective, having a (self) critical / questioning attitude, and more. Development practitioners who are able to design a reflection and analysis process that allows them to deepen the ToC of their efforts demonstrate 'ToC capacity'. ToC capacity is also shown in the deliberate choice of the combination and tailored adaptation of the set of tools applied in ToC practice to the own needs and context. This needs practice, self-confidence, critical self-reflection and awareness about areas where theory or knowledge is lacking.

Facilitate the development of ToC capacities

Facilitating a ToC process means investing in capacities at individual, team, organisational and sometimes network levels. Individual people have different ideas about how change happens, and teams and organisations may also have different perspectives. The facilitator helps participants to acknowledge different views on change and design a shared ToC (or a number of parallel ToCs). Formulating a ToC strengthens the strategic thinking capacity of individuals, the team, the organisation and the network, and their basis for collaboration.

The facilitator helps participants to engage in (and during) the process of designing, planning and implementation. Organisations can more clearly define their roles in relation to other actors, articulating which actors need more or less engagement in their perception, and seeking collaboration with others as it becomes clear which roles new players could take on. The strategic positioning of an organisation and its added value is becomes more articulated.

The facilitator has the task to help the participants to design a ToC that is sufficiently simple and plausible. Any group needs a clear ToC in order to be able to communicate among the group members, the organisation, and with the outside world and to be understood by others.

Facilitate to create space for critical questioning

ToC sessions challenge participants, and the facilitator, to be critical and aware of their own limited perspectives. The ToC facilitator needs to create space for interrogation on the 'why' and 'how' of change: How do we think change pathways will evolve and why do we think that? ToC practice therefore stimulates a questioning attitude that should be promoted by the facilitator. Reflection loops are part of the ToC events and serve to help the group to synthesise findings and review the different elements of the ToC. ToC practice invites people to question topics, change processes, relationships that are often taken for granted and share the ideas and assumptions that underpin their daily work.

Capacity a ToC facilitator needs

What types of abilities are needed to facilitate a ToC process?

First, a facilitator needs a good understanding of ToC and its core building blocks, and specific examples to illustrate key points.

Second, the facilitator needs to design a programme together with the requesting organisation or group, with the possible steps and sessions that may be included. Depending on the situation most ToC programmes will include an introduction, agreement on the goal, design of causal pathways, a session on assumptions, articulating values, identification of knowledge gaps, and visualisation of the ToC. The facilitator should be capable to design a programme in which it is clear what s/he expects participants to do and produce as outputs (for an example of a ToC workshop programme: Annex 1).

Each ToC event will differ and therefore needs a different emphasis and focus. Sometimes probing questions will be more central in order to surface underlying values and assumptions. Sometimes the facilitator will have to help in causal thinking. Sometimes it will be more important to deepen contextual understanding, drawing the teams' attention to factors that add to the complexity of their situation. But sometimes the reverse will be needed: how to make a 'simple' ToC story that summarises the main elements of the complex context and how the organisation is dealing with them.

Facilitators also need the competence to handle a set of 'thought tools' that are relevant to the tasks needed for the particular ToC process being facilitated: tools for power analysis, context analysis specified in situational, actor analysis, value chain analysis, cause effect thinking, visualisation, scenario thinking, helping people to express themselves, group dynamics and interaction, etc. (for an overview of thought tools: <http://www.wageningenportals.nl/msp/>). Practise these beforehand in order to be able to recognise when to apply them and why. When ToC facilitation capacity is not strong enough within the team, an experienced external facilitator is often engaged.

Checklist for the ToC facilitator

From the discussions of the learning community, it was clear that a ToC process can vary greatly in terms of purpose, time frame, participant levels of understanding, organisational dynamics and continuity. Irrespective of the different facilitation designs this will lead to, we identified several necessary elements in any ToC process, which are presented below.

Preparation. Be clear about the objective and intended outcomes of the event. Do we have to deal with a ToC in an on-going programme or is it the start of a new one? Be clear about at what moment of the programme cycle (design, planning, strategic review, evaluation?) the session takes place, be clear what room for change there is at that moment; have clear instructions and focusing questions for each session; keep it as simple as possible. For example, is the session about eliciting more on assumptions, or spending more time understanding the context and problem? A ToC process can rapidly expand into discussions that could continue for days, so be very time conscious. Have examples and visualisations prepared, do not be over ambitious about what can be achieved, and adjust plans as people's questions and needs around ToC become clearer.

Introduction: At the start it is important to share what ToC experiences participants have, request their expectations on working with ToC and why specific ToC elements might assist them. Then agree together on the objectives of the session for which you made a proposition.

Group Interactivity and self-reflection: Avoid leading people too much, people should also find their own 'theory of change journey'. A ToC facilitator should leave some empty space for reflection and digesting of ideas. It is tempting to over-structure and pack the programme with activities. A ToC facilitator needs to create an atmosphere that breaks down barriers between people and makes them feel safe to question, probe and adjust their thinking. So alternate between small groups and plenary sessions and spend time building a common language on ToC concepts and tools.

Recording: Record all ToC material on flipchart paper and stick finished sheets to the walls; have helpers to write up discussions in detail; and write up the workshop as soon as possible. Document output that participants can take home and work on progressively.

Deal with frustrations and concerns: Be responsive to people's concerns or frustrations; give people time to relax and unwind; frustration and conflict are healthy parts of a ToC workshop, learn how to manage them and don't be frightened. Take risks with ToC workshops and don't worry too much about getting it perfect. Often the last day is redesigned based on the results of the first days.

Deal with your own behaviour / reactions: Check regularly with yourself and / or co-facilitator your own behaviour and reactions. And adjust accordingly. Culturally biased assumptions for instance could play a role when the facilitator is coming from a different culture.

The way forward, at the end of the ToC session: Will the result be shared with others?

How? Will the ToC be complemented by a M&E plan? What is the room for change and how will it be used? It is rare to complete a ToC within the workshop, often a small group needs to be tasked with capturing and developing the outputs, but it should be clear that the products will be shared and the other participants will be asked for feedback.

Annex 1: Example of a 2,5 days ToC workshop programme organised by Hivos Southern Africa.

Purposes

1. Reinforce participants' understanding of the value of critical reflection and good quality ToC to develop and track programme change pathways
2. Strengthen existing skills in identifying and questioning explicit and implicit assumptions connected to different, interacting change pathways
3. Generate shared understanding about how to use ToC with others (especially partners and consultants)

Outputs

1. Greater confidence and stronger practical skills of programme staff to know when and how to work individually, with colleagues and with partners to:
 - a. assess the relative merits of diverse strategy options
 - b. identify critical key assumptions and how to use them in design / monitoring
 - c. identify knowledge gaps
 - d. reflect on (strategic) partner choice (other actors, other roles, etc) in Zimbabwe context
 - e. rethinking what is needed for evidence-based context analysis.
2. Three of existing Hivos programmes critically reviewed based on points a-e above
3. Guidance notes on how programme staff can work with consultants and partners on points a-e above.

Approach

The 2.5 days will be based on three existing programmes of Hivos Southern Africa. Participants will use several 'tools for thought' to strengthen their skills to develop and question the underlying logic of existing programmes. A fourth case will be used on the last day for participants to apply their collective skills and insights.

Day 1: Introduction, Good ToC, Strategy Pathways, Assumptions

| Time | Topic | Process |
|-------------|---|--|
| 08.30 | Introduction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome and workshop agenda • Who is in the room? • Expectations |
| 09.45 | State of the art of ToC thinking | Introduction: What constitutes good quality ToC? |
| 10.15 | Coffee break | |
| 10.30 | Introduce the Cases | Case owners share their case in 5 -10 minutes and groups form that will focus on the case for the rest of Day 1 and |

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| | | Day 2. |
| 11.00 | Strategy Pathways | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to working with pathways of change around four dimensions of change (personal, relational, cultural and structural). • Plenary exercise and then case-based group work |
| 12.30 | Lunch | |
| 13.30 | Strategy options (finalise) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groups work for 30 minutes to finalise • Round of discussions with plenary feedback: new insights and remaining doubts. |
| 14.30 | Using <i>strategy options/causal pathways</i> with others | Participants will identify how they will use any new thinking and skills in interactions with partners other actors. In this way, rolling guidance notes will emerge. |
| 15.00 | Break | |
| 15.15 | Assumptions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plenary introduction about assumptions: why they matter and what kinds there are. • Case-based group work around key assumptions for strategy / causal pathways. |
| 17.15 | Wrapping up the day | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Return to participants' initial personal questions. • 'Check out' – needs met and need requiring attention |
| 17.30 | Close | |

Day 2: Assumptions for Tracking, Partner Options and Pathway Choice

| Time | Topic | Process |
|-------------|--|--|
| 08.30 | Checking in | Connecting with each other and the day |
| 08.45 | Assumptions to track progress | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group discussions on assumptions • Plenary: How to use assumptions to track progress. • Group work on using assumptions for tracking |
| 10.15 | Break | |
| 10.30 | Using <i>assumptions</i> with others | Participants will identify how they will use any new thinking and skills in interactions with partners other actors. In this way, rolling guidance notes will emerge. |
| 11.00 | Partner choice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plenary brainstorm on current practice • Plenary introduction: good quality ToC work and (re)assessing partner choice and actor analysis • Case-based group work |
| 12.30 | Lunch | |
| 13.30 | continue 'Partner choice' | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groups continue • Plenary feedback |
| 14.30 | Using <i>partner choice</i> with others | Participants will identify how they will use any new thinking and skills in interactions with partners other actors. In this way, rolling guidance notes will emerge. |
| 15.00 | Break | |
| 15.15 | Assessing pathways | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plenary introduction: Where does Hivos fit into the larger change processes? |

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| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collectively identify criteria • Case-based group work – review causal pathways to identify which are the ones for Hivos to contribute to most |
| 16.45 | Knowledge gaps | Quick scan of case work to identify knowledge gaps Plenary feedback |
| 17.15 | Wrapping up the day | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Return to participants' initial personal questions. • 'Check out' – needs met and need requiring attention. |
| 17.30 | Close | |

Day 3 (half day): Applying Skills with Others, Next Steps

| Time | Topic | Process |
|-------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| 08.30 | Checking in | Connecting with each other and the last morning |
| 08.40 | Putting skills into practice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plenary introduction: Scanning a fourth project to identify how ToC tools for thought can strengthen it. • Group work, using ritual dissent process |
| 10.00 | Break | |
| 10.15 | Last questions | Open discussion about any ToC related questions. Collective generation of answers. |
| 10.45 | Planning for the Future | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess utility of 'good quality ToC' and link back to organisational context – what is needed to support what participants and Hivos Southern Africa value? • Planning next steps – follow-up support and guidance, intentions for 2013 with ToC skills and processes (individual and group level). |
| 12.00 | Evaluation | Mix of written individual and plenary exercises; review initial personal assumptions |
| 12.30 | End | |