Rigid plan or vague vision: How precise does a ToC needs to be?

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This paper has been written as a reflection on the second E-discussion on Theories of Change (21 Nov - 16 Dec 2011). The theme for this discussion was phrased as: Rigid plan or vague vision: How precise does a ToC needs to be?

1. Introduction

This discussion paper has been written as a reflection on the second E-discussion on Theory of Change (21 November – 16 December 2011). It is one of the outcomes of the Hivos Theory of Change Programme (www.hivos.net). We thank everyone that has contributed to this paper.

The second E-discussion focused on the issue of the scope of a Theory of Change (ToC). Can we arrive at some common ground as to how we should put boundaries on required ToC precision? That was the overarching question for this exchange of ideas. However, of course people raise the question as to whether we need such boundaries at all and what purpose they should serve. As soon as we start discussing boundaries, we start looking at what is the context and who is involved. Contributions often focused on these two questions.

Two statements were shared to start off this discussion:

Rather than putting predefined boundaries on required ToC precision, the articulation process should first of all activate strategic thinking of those involved in the process of articulating the ToC. Whatever precision they come up with, will be just fine, even if people like to work with a rigid plan.

When applying too wide boundaries on ToC thinking we basically arrive at politics, so with our ToC practice we should stay close to logic models to keep things systematic and practical.

2. Initial ideas presented

Boundaries of Theories of Change: the process and the analysis

To be clear on boundaries of ToCs means being clear on the boundaries of the process of ToC articulation and boundaries of the actual analysis itself. ToC's often are revised and updated in the course of the programme life, taking into account lessons learned and opportunities for improvement of the ToC.

As far as the process of articulating the ToC is concerned, we need to be clear on issues such as who to involve in the process, and whether to approach it as a one-off effort (e.g. to inform design), or something to regularly return to (e.g. for strategic guidance purposes).

As far as the boundaries of analysis are concerned, we need to be clear on what is important and relevant to include, such as:
• Differences regarding how key stakeholders anticipate this process.
• Differences regarding as to who are the key stakeholders.
• Critical uncertainties that may throw a surprise here and there.
• Possibly unreasonable expectations.
• Possibly unrealistic or invalid assumptions.
• Different ideas about the geographical focus of the initiative.
• Required sequencing in time.
• Realisation of what capacities will need to be in place.

Having worked with appropriate boundaries in terms of both articulation process and analysis will lead to several outcomes and products.

Often the main outcome is a shared understanding among key stakeholders of what an envisaged change process may entail. A visual synthesis is often helpful. This helps bring in strategic alignment among them to be able to work together more effectively. This, of course, requires the facilitation of the articulation process for a sufficiently broad range of stakeholders. The process of developing a ToC is in itself as much an objective as the product that results from it. The process creates the opportunity of exchanging thoughts and ideas, which often helps in creating shared perspectives and building trust through the appreciation of stakes involved.

The ToC as a product in a visual format or a summary outline of key components informs further planning processes in terms of Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) mechanisms and operational & strategic management, and it consolidates the shared understanding. An example of a visual summary from Hivos' practice is given below (TWAWEZA).

Figure 1 - *Visual ToC Summary TWAWEZA*

What and who determines Theory of Change precision?

There appears to be a tendency in working with the ToC approach, similar to what happened to Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) in the nineties of the last century: a mechanistic usage for the purpose of covering a requirement (by external demand) rather than seeking participatory exploration to broaden perspectives and enhancing subsequent effectiveness of collaborative action. This is just one example to show that

the boundaries of ToC precision are determined by more factors than only the approach to ToC. Other factors include:

- The way in which the ToC articulation is facilitated.
- The decision-making context that may be more - or less ready to respond appropriately to the insights that a ToC provides.
- The level of complexity of the change process.
- The ability to 'be hard' on oneself in acknowledging the uncertainties, the possibly unrealistic or invalid assumptions and other concerns regarding an envisaged change process.

So, the process of exploring boundaries of ToC precision needs to include questions regarding readiness to adopt and agree on appropriate boundaries. Which leaves us with the question of how to determine what could be considered as appropriate boundaries.

The Theories of Change precision continuum

If we browse through the range of ToC approaches, we find approaches that hardly go beyond a basic logic model, such as an objective tree. On the other extreme, we find those advocating for in-depth analysis of complex interactions, leading to rather theoretical models.
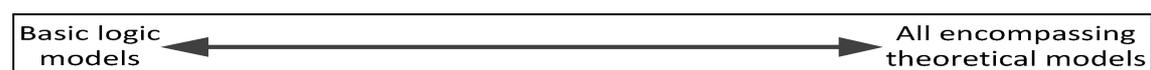
Roughly speaking, on the left-side of the continuum we tend to find more linear approaches to 'how change happens' whereas we will find complexity-thinking inspired approaches on the right side. Who is right and who is wrong? Or is it a matter of 'it all depends'? Is there a supposedly correct level of required precision?

A key question to ask seems to be: 'what are your ToC needs?' along the lines of how we try to establish information needs in designing a M&E plan. Given the specifics of the situation in which you want to make a significant difference, what do you need to know about actors, about the context, about underlying ideas concerning 'how change happens'? In this way, the articulation of a ToC does not follow a predefined set of explorations, but rather activates strategic thinking on what would be appropriate and helpful in that particular situation. In this way, the ToC articulation process will also strengthen the ability to think and act strategically.

Clarifying Theory of Change needs

Usually, the ToC requires a process of 'zooming in and out': zooming in on questions regarding on-the-ground realities and zooming out on the bigger picture questions. Throughout a collaborative effort questions regarding 'how change happens' will sometimes need to zoom in on those on-the-ground realities and sometimes zoom out on that bigger picture and more fundamental questions. Other factors to consider include:

- The stage of the collaboration process at which the ToC is articulated. Earlier on, more fundamental questions may be appropriate, while later on this may be experienced as too theoretical. Or it may be the other way around that earlier

on it is more difficult to articulate fundamental questions and that questions emerge as you start working together.

- The levels and scales at which a ToC is articulated: a ToC for a regional collaborative effort requires something different than for a local-level technical project. Dave Snowden suggests distinguishing between 'simple', 'complicated', and 'complex' situations, each relating to a different type and depth of questions to ask (www.cognitive-edge.com).

- The programme horizons: Something that involves a three-year process requires a different kind of ToC articulation than a ten-year strategic framework agreement.

The clearer ToC needs have been defined, the clearer the required boundaries of ToC precision will be.

3. Discussion

In general, many contributors would agree that there are a couple of things to consider when defining boundaries of ToC articulation processes. There are different types of boundaries to consider though. They include the following. Boundaries need to match what is…

- **Realistic** in terms of expectations of what lies within the sphere of influence of the initiative.

- **Feasible** in terms of process facilitation and management.

'Social movements (…) engage in 'TOC thinking' all the time, whether we call it that or not" (Alia Khan)'

- Fitting in terms of **levels of complexity**, matching the type of dynamics and uncertainties involved.

- In line with the **scale of the mission**, in terms of the domain of change in which the initiative intends to make a difference (relevance). This may range from small and focused to wide and comprehensive.

- Appropriately **connected** in terms of the breadth of range of **stakeholders** to be considered in the picture.

- Both right and opportune in terms of **controversiality**. Some issues will be sensitive, also in the process of articulating theories of change. How far to stretch before required collaboration will be jeopardised? This
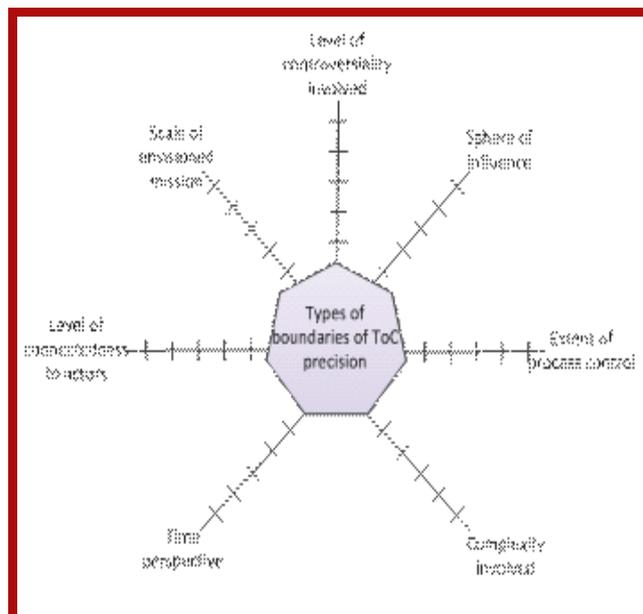

Figure 2 - *Choices to make and agreement to be reached concerning what appropriate boundaries apply in a particular setting*

also relates to the type of power relations involved and how deep engagement in this can/should go.

- Within a relevant **time perspective**, which involves question of sustainability and how far this initiative needs to 'think into the future' to understand change assumptions. It also relates to the level of (strategic) foresight required.

However, we may need to distinguish between two aspects of the articulation process: the initial broader brainstorm (which some would refer to as the actual ToC process), and the consolidation process (which some may want to refer to as the Theory of Action), which may take all sorts of shapes, such as a business plan, manifesto, declaration, work plan or whatever vehicle is meaningful and useful to that group (Alia Khan). It will often not be appropriate to put too many boundaries on a process of brainstorming and exploration. This would be steering the process too much and undermine shared strategic thinking. However, for the purpose of (strategic) guidance of the development initiative, appropriate boundaries become more relevant as it should help in guiding action rather than just being a purpose in itself. Boundaries in relation to such guidance ability involve asking about strategic information needs and even performance questions.

In all of this, working with appropriate boundaries also relates to appropriate expectations. A project should not assume it can change societal processes within its life span (Bishwadeep Ghose). We should not get carried away in social change dreams. At the same time, such broader perspectives on (social) change will be inspiring for positioning specific development initiatives as part of a wider change process. We

> 'Avoid falling in the trap of believing that the model replaces reality' (Susana Rochna)

may also phrase this as the boundaries that are put on the ToC articulation process by the context in which it is carried out. But not only from outside, also from the inside. This relates to the way (partner) organisations are operating and the enabling context that this is providing or not for thinking, learning and acting strategically (Corina Straatsma). The word 'boundaries' may easily be equated with 'regulation'. Boundaries are needed but the process of defining them needs to be sufficiently participatory to establish appropriate ownership at all levels. How to embed the ToC articulation process in the organisation in such a way that it does not become an externally driven process? How to stimulate strategic thinking through it?

Boundaries also relates to our mindsets and preferences. We may (unconsciously) put our own boundaries on the process of identifying e.g. key stakeholders and their perspectives and stakes when we have (right or wrong) preconceived ideas about them (Bishwadeep Ghose). Other types of boundaries may relate to potential threats to a certain status quo for instance in gender programmes. This may restrict the freedom of exploration.

4. Conclusion

> '(TOC articulation) is only valuable if the people involved own it and are allowed to define the boundaries' (Alia Khan)

We may say that there are many dimensions to the issue of 'boundaries of a ToC'. Whether we will be able to settle on appropriate boundaries or not, is less important than the process of considering how we will go about this in a particular setting. Any process of articulating a ToC may therefore

need to start with agreeing on how to approach various types of boundaries involved (see figure 2) and agree on an appropriate process beforehand. There are two threads that run through this process: the thread of open exploration (more along the lines of a theory of change in a broader sense) and the thread of task-oriented development of management input (more along the lines of a theory of action). They should not be mixed too soon, to create an enabling context for shared exploration and learning. Regarding the issues brought up concerning appropriate modesty about what a project or programme can do, we may perhaps consider these processes as a gradual bigger development process that is fed by inputs from smaller ToCs and gradually builds up momentum (Bishwadeep Ghose). Not all stakeholders will want to expand boundaries the same way. A ToC may threaten a certain status quo. Such restrictions can be challenges that may jeopardise collaborative efforts. A ToC is first of all an exploratory process, which expands comprehension of 'how change happens' and implications for development initiatives.

The contributions brought into the E discussions confirmed that in each situation it is important to remain critical while engaging with stakeholders into a change process and considering ToC articulation. This may prevent ending up in mechanical compliance with external requirements, which is exactly what a ToC articulation process is meant to overcome. It is not a matter of 'getting it right' from a theoretical perspective, but getting it right in context. It will often involve going up and down between 'ideal' and 'real' to find the right balance.

ToC is not a miracle tool that will create conducive circumstances for change, both internally and externally. That is not how it works. It needs to be activated to provide insights and lead to action to improve capacities and conditions for change. There is no standard way of engaging in such a process. It may help to develop checklists for process performance, on which 'boundaries' will also feature.