

Hivos and Theory of Change

Experiences and lessons of the first phase 2007 - 2010

Background

Some years ago, Hivos searched for an alternative for the 'standard' planning and reporting frameworks that would be more appropriate to its own and partners' practices and that would support us all in strategic thinking and more systematic learning. In 2007 this resulted in a pilot in capacity development support to partner organisations, using a Theory of Change approach, taking a broader perspective and with objectives of strengthening "result-oriented practice". Since then, this process has gone through several phases of experimentation and reflection.

In complex settings Theory of Change analysis is – in Hivos view – a viable way for an organisation to understand its context, to plan and act strategically and to bring its organisational practice optimally in line with its needs and goals. An important element of Theory of Change analysis is exploring and making explicit the thinking of individuals and organisations behind policies and practice, which provides a strong basis for more coherent, shared and strategic organisational development, strategic action and learning about change processes.

The capacity development support to partners consisted of an introductory workshop and an offer for a facilitated in-house follow-up process, to explore and implement the approach according to the organisation's needs. Most participating organisations responded positively to the approach in the workshop, but the follow-up process proved difficult to realise: the offer for support was not taken up as often as was expected. So, although this set-up triggered interest and debate, it didn't solve some of the main problems we had with earlier forms of training for improved result orientation: follow-up and implementation in practice.

Since 2007 a lot has been learnt about this process. After a learning workshop in November 2008 with consultants and Hivos staff who had been involved in the first phase of this process, some changes were made in the set-up and programme of the workshops in 2009, but that didn't lead to substantially better outcomes. Many factors at play have been identified.

Experiences and lessons

We concluded that the process reflects a number of challenges and questions, of which only some seem to be specifically related to Theory of Change as an approach.

Support to capacity development (CD) as such

- Ownership: the way the process was organised and its focus on result-orientation caused that some partner organisations experienced it as one-way and donor-driven.
- The choice to prioritise weak(er) organisations for the CD support meant that we introduced ToC in situations where the conditions for a quite complex learning process were not strong.
- The communication with participating partners about their CD needs and the appropriate timing of the support offer has not always been sufficient.
- The effects of support to capacity development on the quality of performance are difficult to assess. Changes in organisational capacities for strategic analysis, PM&E and internal learning cannot be easily 'measured' and attributed to a specific intervention, and take time to materialise. The fact that partners didn't ask for an externally supported follow-up process doesn't mean that they didn't use the thinking and the instruments they worked with in the workshop.

Processes of organisational change

- Change of organisational practice and behaviour is influenced by many more factors than new insights and knowledge alone, however appreciated a new idea or approach may be – as was in general the case with ToC. The CD support process took those factors and (dis)incentives insufficiently into account and didn't pay enough attention to the conditions needed for all actors involved to engage with the process effectively.

- ToC thinking can be confrontational and trigger resistance to change. A Theory of Change analysis entails an in-depth and critical questioning of the organisation's position, strategies and practice. It may touch upon sensitive issues such as the existing power relations in the organisation, or the need for collaboration with other actors, sometimes across deeply felt differences. Conflicting views or interests may come to the surface. An honest reflection can thus lead to 'non-desired' outcomes, which - consciously or unconsciously - may cause hesitation with the management or staff to engage with it, or to follow it through after a first exploration.

Theory of Change as an approach and practice

- ToC thinking brings complexity into the analysis and the 'planning' of the change process. That is an important added value, but can also cause confusion and an overload of factors to take into account. After a phase of exploration some clear boundaries need to be set and initial choices to be made, in order to be able to take next steps - without falling back into linear thinking and oversimplification. Finding a manageable balance between complexity and room for emergence on the one hand, and a necessary clarity of direction on the other, proves to be challenging.
- Going through an (initial) ToC analysis demands time and a commitment from the management to engage with it and to invest in time for staff, and possibly other stakeholders, to participate in the process. Timing of the process is important: it appears that it can best be planned - both in terms of investment and of benefits - when an organisation is doing a policy review or longer-term strategic planning process, or is preparing for a new, large programme.
- Partner organisations point to the different requirements and formats of donors for planning and reporting. They fear an additional reporting burden because 'ToC in practice' leads to different PM&E practices than the output reporting many donors – in contrast to Hivos - seem to require.

Aid context

- The context of international development cooperation does not provide a conducive environment for approaches that acknowledge uncertainty and complexity and promote adaptive responses. The incentive mechanisms of the aid system and of funding relationships, such as pressure for short term results, 'blue print' thinking, upward accountability, project funding, and 'value for money' approaches push partner organisations and Hivos itself in an opposite direction.

Lack of facilitation capacity

- In general, a ToC process needs external facilitation, at least for the first period. We were confronted with the fact that there are few consultants and CD support organisations in the South that are well acquainted with the thinking, methods and facilitation skills to accompany Theory of Change analysis in organisations. There is insufficient accessible and responsive (local) expert support.

Hivos own practice

- Hivos own donor practice is not always conducive to the application of an approach that encourages emergence and adaptive planning, and demands flexibility and a longer term perspective: we don't always practice what we preach. This is partly related to the aid context and its pressures as described above and that are felt by Hivos too.
- Hivos started this process as a capacity development support process for partner organisations. In the course of time a legitimate question from both partners and Hivos staff came up: what is Hivos itself doing with ToC? What is the position of ToC thinking in Hivos own practice?

Based on the experiences and lessons of the first phase of the process Hivos decided in 2010 to broaden the scope of the process beyond CD support to partner organisations, to take a more explorative angle to the next phase, and to seek external support. Learning about diverse ways of applying ToC in practice, issues of Hivos own programming practice and staff capacity, and the need for (external) facilitation capacity in the regions where Hivos is active should be included. For this process Hivos entered in a collaboration with the Centre for Development Innovation (CDI, Wageningen University, The Netherlands), CDRA (South Africa) and Muyu (Iñigo Retolaza Eguren and Paola Roza Lopéz, independent consultants, Bolivia). Due to reasons not related to the ToC process, this new phase started effectively in 2011.