Guidance for Developing a Theory of Change for Your Programme
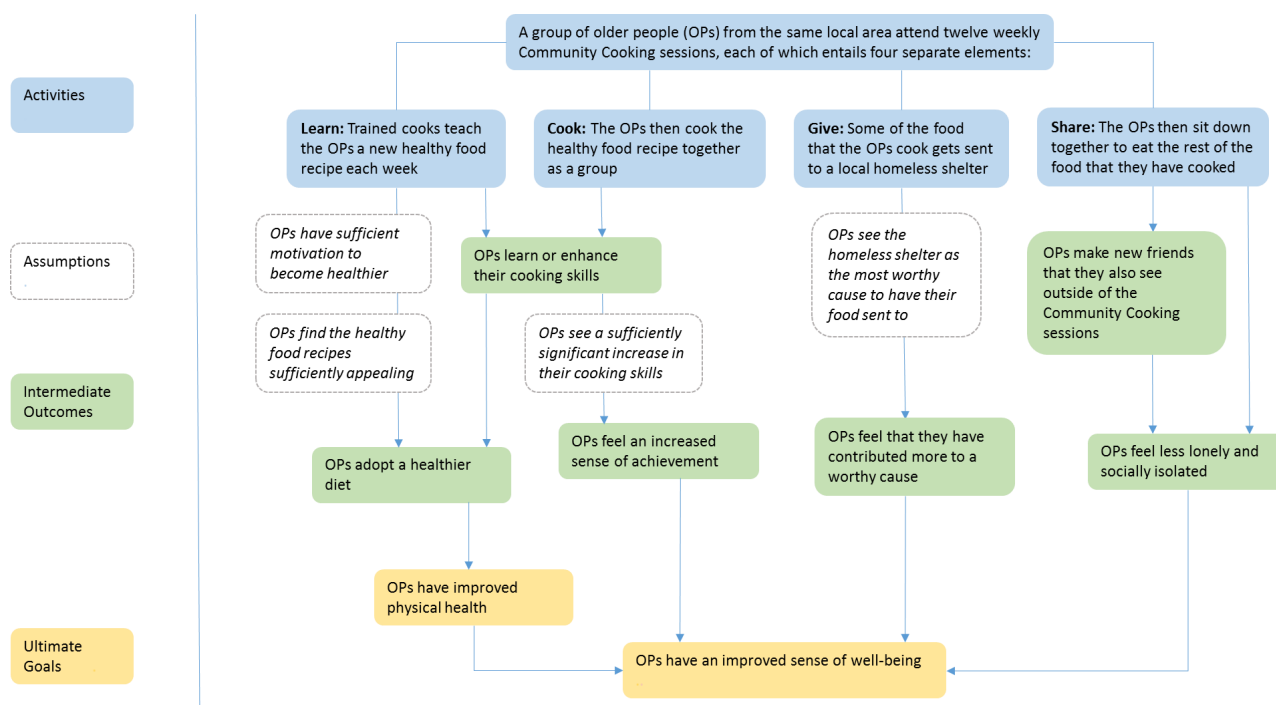
Introduction

At the Centre for Social Action Innovation Fund (CSAIF) we believe that a clear, concise and convincing explanation of what you do, what impact you aim to have and how you believe you will have it is a vital foundation of any programme, and a prerequisite for effective evaluation. For this reason, producing a Theory of Change is an obligatory requirement for achieving Level 1 on Nesta's Standards of Evidence.

What is a Theory of Change?

A Theory of Change is a diagram that explains how a programme has an impact on its beneficiaries. It outlines all the things that a programme does for of its beneficiaries, the ultimate impact that it aims to have on them, and all the separate outcomes that lead or contribute to that impact.

A Theory of Change should not refer to the scale, growth plan or operational details of the organisation itself – it should effectively describe and explain the impact of the programme from a beneficiary's point of view.

An example of what a Theory of Change might look like can be found below (please note that this Theory of Change can be seen in higher resolution at the end of this document):

Why are Theories of Change useful?

- **Internal programme development:** The process of developing a Theory of Change can help you to refine and enhance the effectiveness of your programme.
- **External communication:** The Theory of Change itself can be a useful tool for communicating what your programme does, and how it has an impact, in a clear and convincing way.
- **Evaluation:** It is also a first step in designing an effective evaluation, as it accurately identifies all of your outcomes that need to be measured.

How are Theories of Change created?

At the CSAIF we believe that a good Theory of Change requires the following five core elements or processes:

1. Identifying your **ultimate goal(s)**	2. Identifying your **intermediate outcomes**	3. Identifying your **activities**	4. Showing the **causal links**	5. Examining your **assumptions**

This document will describe each of these five elements in turn, framing them with examples from a fictional programme called 'Community Cooking'. The full Theory of Change diagram for Community Cooking can be found at the end of this document, along with a final checklist of questions to ask yourself before finalising or submitting your own Theory of Change.

But first, here are some initial practical tips on getting started on your own Theory of Change:

Initial Tips

- You can use a variety of widely available software to draw your Theory of Change, e.g. MS PowerPoint, MS Excel or MS Word.
- However, we recommend that in the first instance you construct your Theory of Change using a big piece of paper and post-it notes, in order to facilitate the creative process.
- This should ideally be done as a group, in order to capture the input of different members of staff, stakeholders, and even beneficiaries.
- Your Theory of Change should be colour-coded and include a key that identifies its different elements (i.e. ultimate goal(s), intermediate outcomes, activities and assumptions).

Step 1: Identifying your **ultimate goal(s)**

Definition: The primary impact that your programme aims to have on its beneficiaries.

Tips

- You should normally have just one or two ultimate goals, and very rarely more than three.
- They should be measurable.

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- They should represent the direct and immediate impact of the programme, rather than the more long-term impact that happens because of it.

Example
The UK's population is ageing, and people are living for longer. As public services become increasingly stretched, they will find it more difficult to meet the needs of older generations - needs that relate both to physical health and mental well-being. A new programme, Community Cooking, wishes to address this – their ultimate goals are therefore improved physical health and an improved sense of well-being amongst older people.

Step 2: Identifying your **intermediate outcomes**

Definition: All the separate changes in the beneficiaries that lead to the ultimate goal.

Tips

- Intermediate outcomes should be measurable.
- They should be comprehensive enough to reflect the complexity of the programme – their aim is to explain in detail all of the changes that happen to beneficiaries during the programme.

Example
Though a large number of different elements can contribute to physical health and a sense of well-being, the Community Cooking programme targets four specifically – a healthier diet, an increased sense of achievement, reduced social isolation and a feeling of contributing to a worthy cause. These therefore form four of the key intermediate outcomes in their Theory of Change. Other intermediate outcomes are then included to explain exactly how those key intermediate outcomes are achieved (please see the Theory of Change diagram at the end of this document for more details).

Step 3: Identifying your **activities**

Definition: All the things that a programme does directly for its beneficiaries, or that the beneficiaries do as part of the programme.

Tips

- Activities should only include the things that impact on the beneficiaries directly, not the more operational things that are done prior to those activities or that impact on the beneficiaries more indirectly (e.g. the referral process, the training of staff etc).
- They should be sufficiently detailed, so that someone unfamiliar with the programme can understand what each activity entails.
- They can be quantified to explain 'dosage' i.e. to explain exactly how much of the activities each beneficiary receives (as opposed to explaining how many beneficiaries the programme currently works with).

Example
Community Cooking involves twelve weekly sessions in which a group of older people from the same local community get together to i) be taught a healthy recipe by a trained chef, ii) cook the recipe in groups, iii) sit down to eat what they've cooked together, and iv) give away some of that food to a local homeless shelter.

Step 4: Showing the **causal links**

- **Definition:** Arrows that explain the causality of your programme in more detail. More specifically, causal links should show which activities lead to which intermediate outcomes, which intermediate outcomes lead to which other intermediate outcomes, and which intermediate outcomes lead to which ultimate goal (if there is more than one ultimate goal).

Tips

- Causal links should reflect the complexity of the programme – generally speaking it is likely that some activities will lead to more than one intermediate outcome, some intermediate outcomes will have more than one activity leading to them, and many intermediate outcomes will lead to other intermediate outcomes (rather than simply linking an activity directly to the ultimate goal).
- However, complexity should also be balanced with clarity – if the number and complexity of causal links are making the Theory of Change difficult to follow or digest, you should consider removing some of the less integral causal links from the diagram.

Example
Community Cooking's Theory of Change argues that sitting down together to eat the food that the older people have cooked leads to them feeling less socially isolated. However, the Theory of Change makes it clear that this happens in two different ways: i) directly, due to the time that the older people spend together during the sessions, and ii) indirectly, due to the older people making friends that they then spend time with outside of the sessions too. It is probable that doing the cooking itself also reduces social isolation in the same way, but Community Cooking have chosen not to represent those causal links on their Theory of Change as i) this is only a secondary effect of that particular activity, and ii) those causal links would have to cross over other causal links, which would reduce the clarity of the Theory of Change diagram.

Step 5: Examining your **assumptions**

Definition: The assumptions that underpin each causal link.

Tips

- The purpose of assumptions is to proactively identify reasons why some of your causal links may not hold true in practice.
- Assumptions should focus on your most contestable causal links i.e. the sections of your Theory of Change that someone might challenge as being less plausible or convincing.

- They should be the very last step in creating your Theory of Change.
- They should always sit on top of a specific causal link, rather than 'floating' elsewhere on the diagram.

Example
Community Cooking's Theory of Change argues that that learning new healthy food recipes will lead to the older people adopting a healthier diet. However, Community Cooking rightly acknowledge that there are some important assumptions that underpin this claim. They are assuming i) that the older people will have sufficient motivation to become healthier, and ii) that they will find the healthy food recipes sufficiently appealing. If either or both of those assumptions do not hold true in practice, it is likely that the older people will not adopt a healthier diet, even if they have learned a number of recipes that would allow them to. Identifying these assumptions may lead to Community Cooking altering their programme to add extra emphasis on the value of a healthier diet, or to change the menu of recipes to make them even more appealing.

Final checklist

- ☐ Does your Theory of Change include activities, intermediate outcomes, causal links, assumptions and one or more ultimate goals?
- ☐ Are each of those elements colour-coded and labelled?
- ☐ Does your Theory of Change avoid referring to the scale of your programme?
- ☐ Does your Theory of Change make it clear who the target population is?
- ☐ Does your Theory of Change describe the 'dosage' of the activities i.e. how much of the activities each beneficiary receives?
- ☐ Does your Theory of Change avoid referring to training, referral routes, marketing, programme setup or any other operational activities?
- ☐ Are all of your intermediate outcomes and ultimate goals measureable?
- ☐ Are some of your intermediate outcomes connected to each other by causal links?
- ☐ Are all of your causal links visually clear i.e. easy to follow on the page?
- ☐ Are all of your assumptions sitting on specific causal links?

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Example Theory of Change – Community Cooking

Activities

A group of older people (OPs) from the same local area attend twelve weekly Community Cooking sessions, each of which entails four separate elements:

Learn: Trained cooks teach the OPs a new healthy food recipe each week

Cook: The OPs then cook the healthy food recipe together as a group

Give: Some of the food that the OPs cook gets sent to a local homeless shelter

Share: The OPs then sit down together to eat the rest of the food that they have cooked

Assumptions

OPs have sufficient motivation to become healthier

OPs learn or enhance their cooking skills

OPs see the homeless shelter as the most worthy cause to have their food sent to

OPs make new friends that they also see outside of the Community Cooking sessions

OPs find the healthy food recipes sufficiently appealing

OPs see a sufficiently significant increase in their cooking skills

Intermediate Outcomes

OPs adopt a healthier diet

OPs feel an increased sense of achievement

OPs feel that they have contributed more to a worthy cause

OPs feel less lonely and socially isolated

Ultimate Goals

OPs have improved physical health

OPs have an improved sense of well-being