

ToC Reflection Notes 4: Visualising your theory of change: *a must?*¹

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Introduction

This note is based on our collective experiences in working with organisations to develop their theory of change (ToC). It focuses on the role of visualisation in the ToC process. Through this note we aim to explain how visualisation in the process helps to *facilitate* thinking by making thinking more explicit and how visualisation helps to better explore your road ahead towards the aspired change.

The European Parliament (EP) twittered on the 16th of August 2013: “Everyone knows that a picture is worth a thousand words... Even better if it’s a picture with words...” In this way the EP showcased some examples from Europe on ‘Infographics’ stressing that when you have to deal with figures, policy development or strategies, sometimes pictures are unable to tell the whole story and words alone are insufficient. This is exactly true for ToC processes: Having a strong ‘visual’ next to the ‘narrative’ helps us to jointly explore our theory to get closer to the desired future and that is what this note wishes to highlight.

This note will give you first of all a few basic facts on visualisation before we focus on how visualisation in ToC processes helps people to communicate, articulate and review their theory of change.

If it is hard to *read*, it is hard to *do*

A Theory of Change is like forward storytelling and is in fact a combination of what people hope to see, what people expect to see and what people assume to see. What people hope for, expect and assume is very personal. Explaining hopes, expectations and assumptions can be very hard and open for multiple interpretations. Song and Schwartz emphasise that people are more likely to engage in certain activities if it requires less effort (Song and Schwartz, 2008). Visualisation helps people to *more quickly* understand and also it helps to *put less effort* to understand each other in the process.

Many scholars have stressed that planning and strategy development will be so much more productive and effective when good and stimulating visualisation is used. In his TED talk (www.ted.com) “Stats that reshape the World”, Hans Rosling uses a very attractive way to interpret data and use them more effectively in setting your objectives. The visualisations used stimulate to think along, they engage and might even motivate to take action. Make it easy to ‘read’ and make it attractive, so that people are motivated to engage, think along and *stimulated to act* ensuring that your Theory of Change will not be just a product on paper. Figure 1 visualises this message ;)



Figure 1. Visualisation needs to stimulate! (source: James Drogan, 2007)

Focus on what needs attention

The power of visualization is in drawing attention to that which *needs* attention. What message do you

¹This reflection note is one output of the learning retreat held by the Hivos ToC action-learning group on September 13-14, 2012. Group members are: Marjan van Es and Karel Chambille (Hivos Head Office), Simone van Vugt, Esther Koopmanschap, and Jan Brouwers (CDI), Irene Guijt (Learning by Design), and Iñigo Retolaza (independent practitioner). Hettie Walters (ICCO), Isabel Vogel and Zenda Ofir (independent practitioners) contributed greatly in their role as learning peers.

wish to deliver, which story do you want to tell?

Have a look at the table and the graph below. Both give the exchange value of the US dollar against G-10 countries. The message of the graph is much better readable than the message of the table. What needs attention is the trend from year to year and that message is hard to extract from the table (figure 2, left) below, but very easily readable from the graph (figure 2, right).

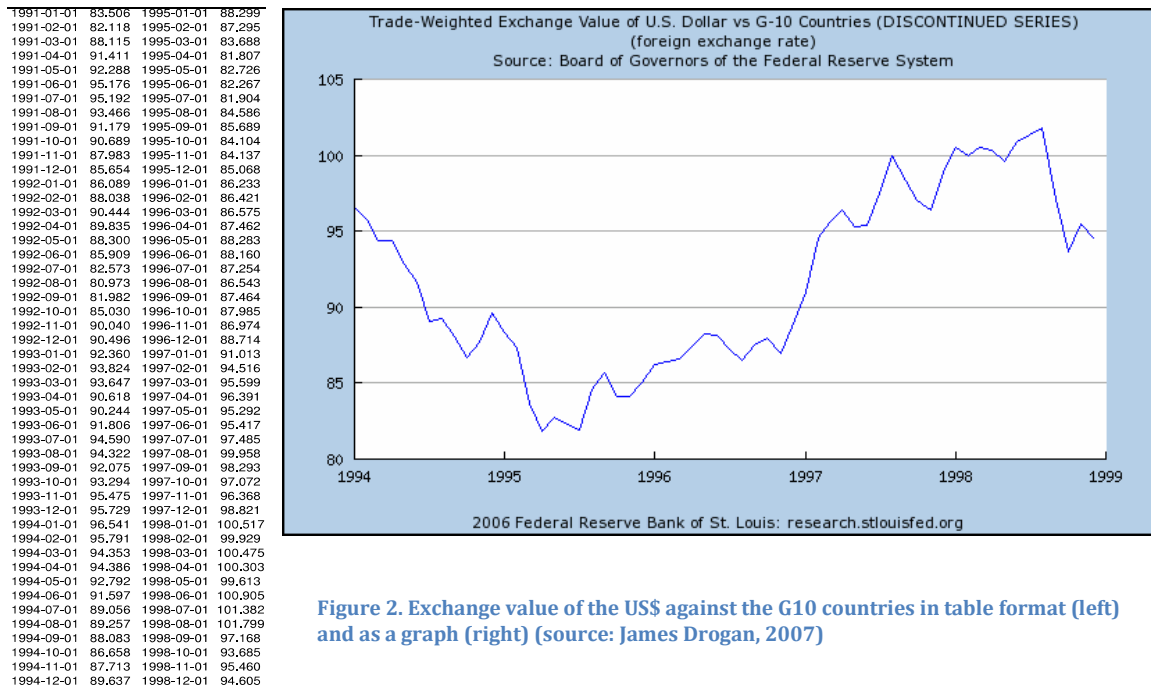


Figure 2. Exchange value of the US\$ against the G10 countries in table format (left) and as a graph (right) (source: James Drogan, 2007)

Less is more, or...

Figure 3 shows that the power of the message reduces if the message mingles too much information. In the graph on the left, you focus more on the picture in the background than on what the graph wishes to communicate, according to Stephen Few (2006). 'Less is more!' 'Or?' Keep in mind, that visualisation is *very* personal. Some people will neglect the graph on the right simply because to them it communicates: 'keep away, boring data ahead' and only read such a graph *just because* of its colourful attraction (which others called distraction). People perceive differently.

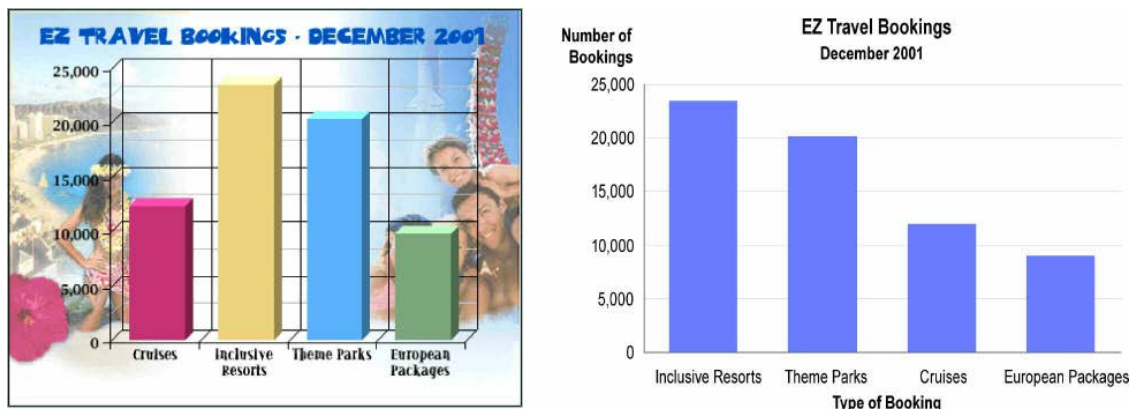


Figure 3: Display neither more nor less (source: Stephen Few, 2006)

Perception

Perception and cognition are closely interrelated, which is the reason why the words 'understanding' and 'seeing' are synonymous. However, the visual system has its own rules. We can easily see patterns presented in certain ways, but if they are presented in other ways, they become invisible... If we can understand how perception works, our knowledge can be translated into rules for displaying information. Following perception-based rules, we can present our data in such a way that the important and informative patterns stand out. If we disobey the rules, our data will be incomprehensible or misleading.
(Source: Ware, 2004)

Although Colin Ware focuses on the need to obey 'the rules' in using visualisation, many others would argue that perception always remains very personal, as people simply perceive differently, and therefore having visualisation rules might not be the right connotation.

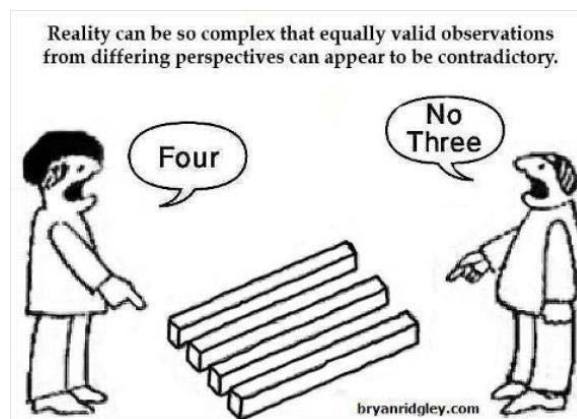


Figure 4: People perceive differently
(Source: bryanridgley.com)

Regarding the use of visualisation in ToC processes we would therefore like to take into account a few important 'points of attention' rather than calling them rules. These are:

1. We can all visualise!;
2. The way we *visualise* is personal;
3. The way we *perceive* is personal;
4. Visualisations need to be clear, simple *and* attractive (and this is not an easy combination!);
5. (Especially in ToC processes) visualisation goes hand in hand with the narrative, together they make the theory complete.

Visualisation in ToC processes

The use of visualisation in a Theory of Change includes the use of visualisation in the ToC development *process* and it includes the visualisation of the 'product' that comes out of this process. There is, of course, a lot of experience 'out there' in using visualisation to enhance understanding each other or to enhance reflection and analysis in the development of the To. Also lots can be shared in using visualisation to *document* the ToC product or products, but still not much of this experience has been written down.

Using visualisation in the ToC development process

Visualisation is an essential part of ToC development processes. Using visualisation in the process helps to quicker and better understand the nuances of the, often, complex issues at hand. The comic below (unfortunately from an anonymous source) shows that 'nothing is so simple that it cannot be misunderstood' (quote of Freeman Teague Jr.).



Figure 5: We all visualise differently (Source: anonymous)

Good visualisation helps all participants involved with the accurate 'decoding' of information and assumptions made, especially, as mentioned earlier, because people perceive differently and because we all make different 'dogs' in our brain. Visualising is a very strong tool to help to overcome these differences in perception and to ensure that you are discussing the same issues at stake.

Visualisation helps to understand the current situation and it helps to understand where we wish to go, our vision. To be able to 'see' and comprehend the challenges we face, to understand the 'bigger picture', it often helps to actually *draw* it. Figure 6 shows an example.

Hamming (1973) said: "The purpose of computing is insight, not numbers". Likewise for visualisation, "The purpose of visualisation is insight, not pictures".
In: Card et al (1999).

On his blog, Jim Woodhill (<http://jimwoodhill.wordpress.com>) enlightens you about the use of this tool: the rich picture exercise. Developing a rich picture is a great way to draw out the current situation or to prepare a vision. Rich pictures are comprised of pictorial information about a situation and help others to understand the complexity of a situation. The real value of a rich picture however is not to represent the complex problem visually, but to force the makers/creators of the rich picture to try and understand the situation *well enough* to be able to represent it visually.



Figure 6: Visual reporting of the Harvard Social Enterprise Conference by The Value Web <http://www.thevalueweb.org>

Visualise your way from current situation towards your vision

In facilitating ToC processes, we often find the following visual useful to develop our theory of change from current situation towards our vision.

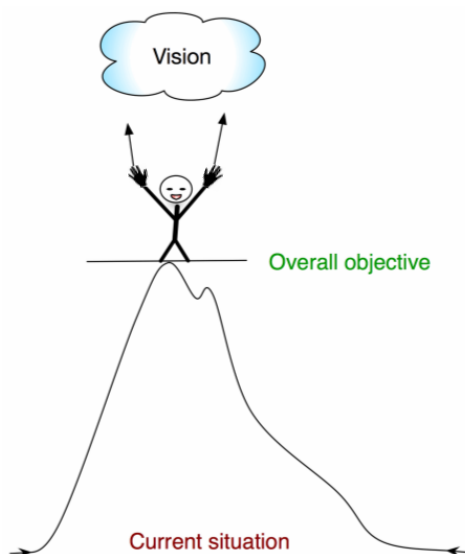


Figure 7: From current situation to vision

Facilitation and visual facilitation

Visual facilitation and visual reporting are increasingly popular ways for facilitation and process documentation. Nowadays we can find 'graphic facilitators' using a combination of images and words to facilitate a process. 'Graphic recorders' document the process and provide real time transcription of the information in a process in a visual manner. You can also try to use it in your ToC process!

It most of the time helps people to see the vision as something very far away, something a bit 'woolly', 'non-concrete', fuzzy... It is the dream or desired change you are heading towards, a change that is not always available to grab or reach, maybe not totally realistic. The top of the mountain, however, is clear, concrete, realistic, something you can reach. It is your long term outcome or overall objective.

There are many different roads or pathways possible towards the vision (your desired change) and to the top of the mountain and you can even think of different means of transport. Sometimes you will need to follow another route if

your road gets blocked. Sometimes you need to go back down, think, observe again, analyse, reflect, try to understand initial assumptions and *look* again at the current situation (visualise it!) and move forward to the top again. The thinking of your theory of change as pathways up to the top of the mountain is, of course, just one example of the possible visualisation of a theory of change process.



Photos: Developing pathways towards the aspired change is an active process (Source: Esther Koopmanschap)

Most important ‘rule’ or point of attention in using visualisation in ToC development processes is that visualisation and visual perception are *active* processes.

“Visual perception is an active process. The brain is not a passive receptor of information, but it completes, organizes and creates priorities (or hierarchies) and relationships to extract meaning.”

(Albert Cairo, 2013)

Each participant in the process organises and creates his/her own priorities and relationships. Albert Cairo also says:

“The goal of the designer should be to arrange compositions anticipating what the user’s brain will most likely try to do.”

(Albert Cairo, 2013)

Be aware that in ToC processes *all participants* are in fact *user* and *designer* at the same time!

Tips for visualisation of your ToC outcomes

It is often challenging to visualise what came out of a ToC process, especially for those who could not join (and actually should have joined), like colleagues or team members: Pictures alone are often unable to tell the whole story and words alone are insufficient, but the combination of the two makes a difference.

Thinking about the way to visualise the outcomes of your discussions is a tool already in itself to create deeper understanding. It forces you to think about what questions those who were not involved will have and to structure the ToC in such a way that it can be understood to participate in follow-up discussions. Thus, visualisation is a tool to explore and reflect on the complexity of a certain situation, on the assumptions and on the pathways to get closer to the ‘desired’ situation. To document your discussions in pictures and words helps to enrich the process of the development of your ToC.

When deciding about how to visualise your Theory of Change it is important to think about the target audience, about the context and about the objective of your visualisation. It is important to keep in mind that your visualisation should help the *user* in the process of understanding.

Unity, variety and hierarchy

“The main principles of graphic design are *unity, variety* and *hierarchy*”, says Albert Cairo. Do not use his principles as ‘hard’ rules for ToC processes, rather use them as tips.

Unity is the presentation of a composition as an integrated whole, not a mere sum of its parts. Variety is both the opposite and the complement of unity: With too much variety, a composition will look random; with too much unity, it will look boring. For instance, you can use the same typeface in different sizes, or one colour in different shades to establish variety. The balance between unity and variety can lead to a good hierarchy. In visualising a Theory of Change it is important to establish a *reading path* that tells people where they should start reading and what is most important.

When developing the visualisation of your ToC you can achieve unity, variety and hierarchy by making use of grids, colour and type.

Metaphors and simple shapes

For the visualisation of the elements of the emerging Theory of Change you can use metaphors or add simple shapes and motifs to written narratives.

Theory of Change visualisations can include metaphors, like gear wheels showing that the movement is being transferred or spirals to stress that your road from your

current situation towards your vision is never or hardly ever a linear straight one. And if we would visualise here what we mean it would look something like this:



An obvious metaphor often used are arrows to indicate direction and/or causal relationships or hierarchy. You can use a bridge to link different items, rivers to reinforce the concept of a process over time or simple representations of people to illustrate the identification of stakeholders, e.g.



Maybe agree with your ‘ToC group’ on certain shapes, motives and artefacts to visualise while brainstorming. This helps you to be able to quickly reinforce text, or remember better what has been discussed. Also do not underestimate the use of whitespace in your visualisations!

Visualisations of Theories of Change outcomes, what could they look like?

Our education system slightly ‘damaged’ the right side of our brain. Most often, therefore, we think in boxes, arrows and cause-effect relationships. Often you see ToC outcomes being visualised using boxed text with arrows to show relationships, as e.g. in figure 8.

In figure 8 the combination between the visual and the narrative was used and even if you have not been involved in the process, you can somehow understand the theory.

Women@Work

Theory of Change

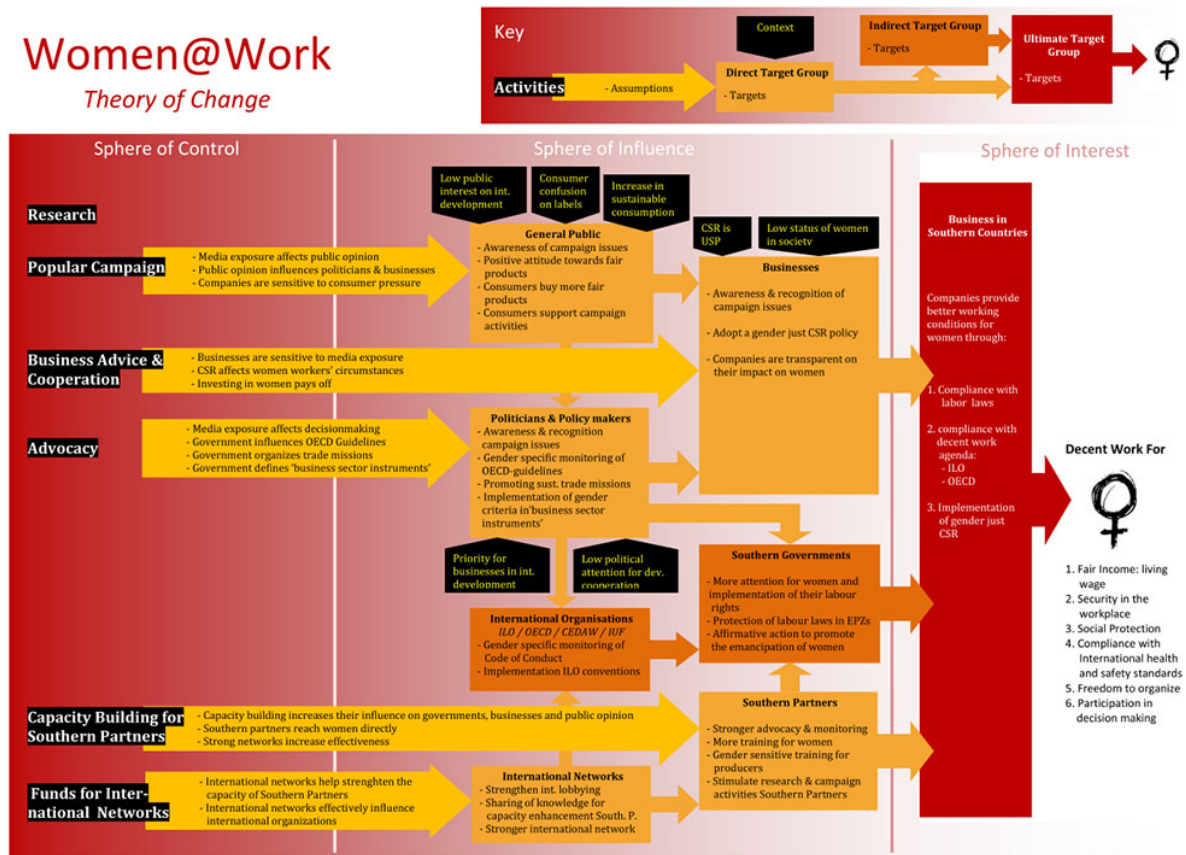


Figure 8: Theory of Change of the Hivos Campaign "Women@Work" (source: Hivos)

Figure 9 and 10 are simple and very to the point, which can be very fine if the narrative is provided in addition. Figure 10 provides a dynamic look as it shows that in the sphere of control a move forward has to be made before, the sphere of influence and eventually the sphere of interest can be set in motion.

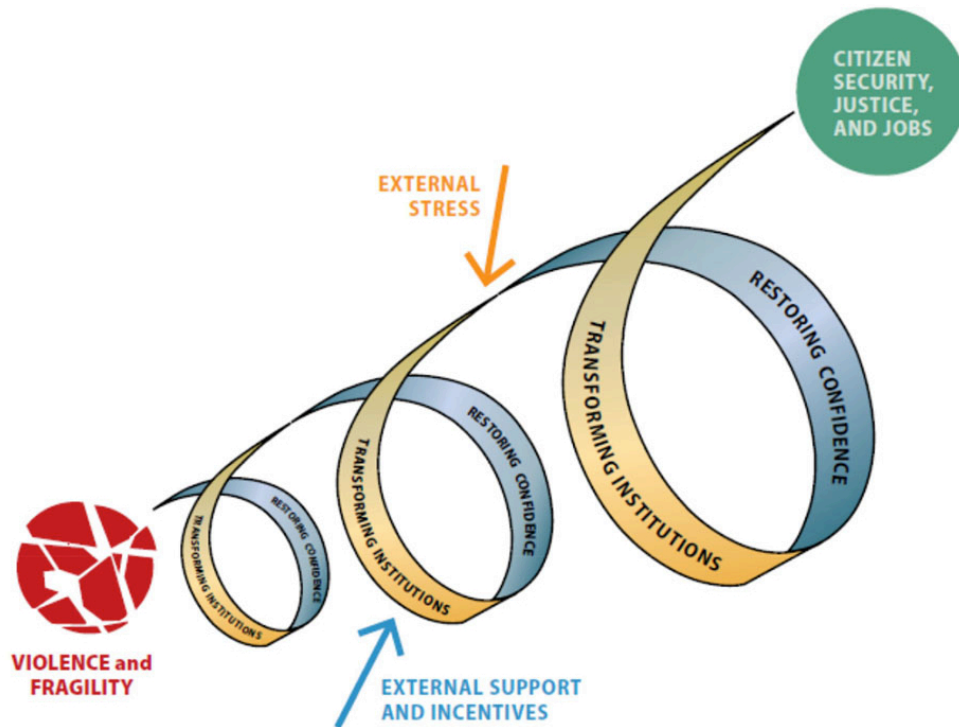


Figure 9: World Development Report 2011 framework, (source: Isabelle Vogel and Zoe Stephenson, 2012, page 21)

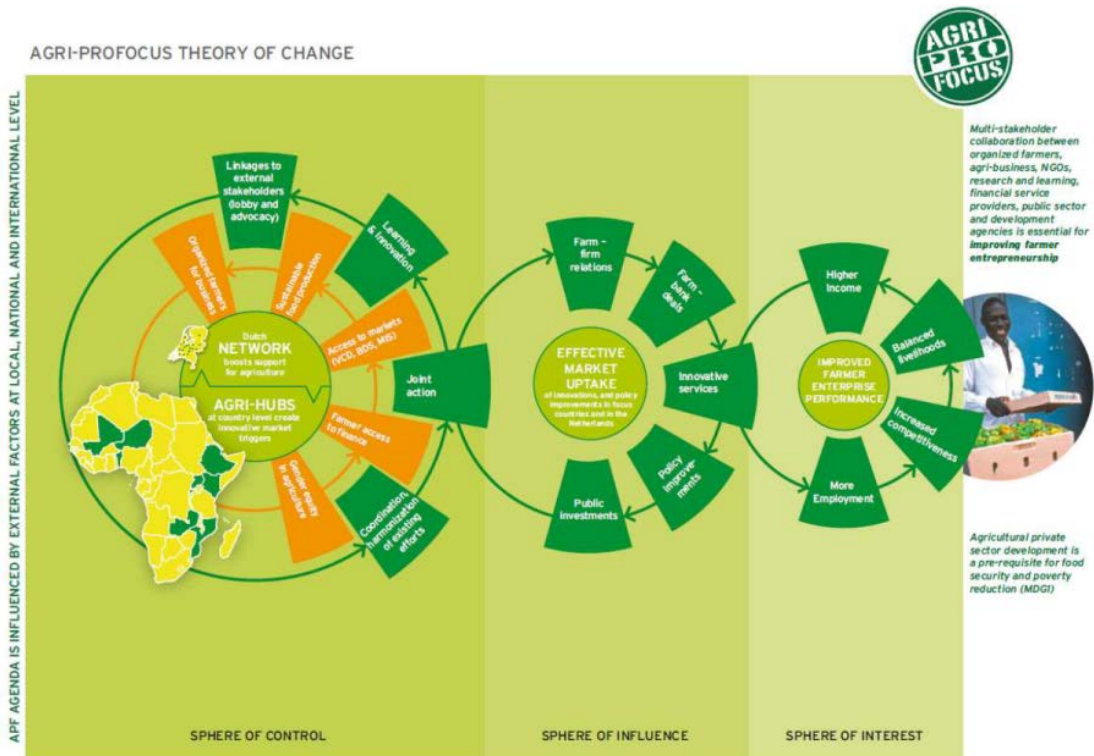


Figure 10: Creating change in Agricultural networks (source: Agri-Profocus)

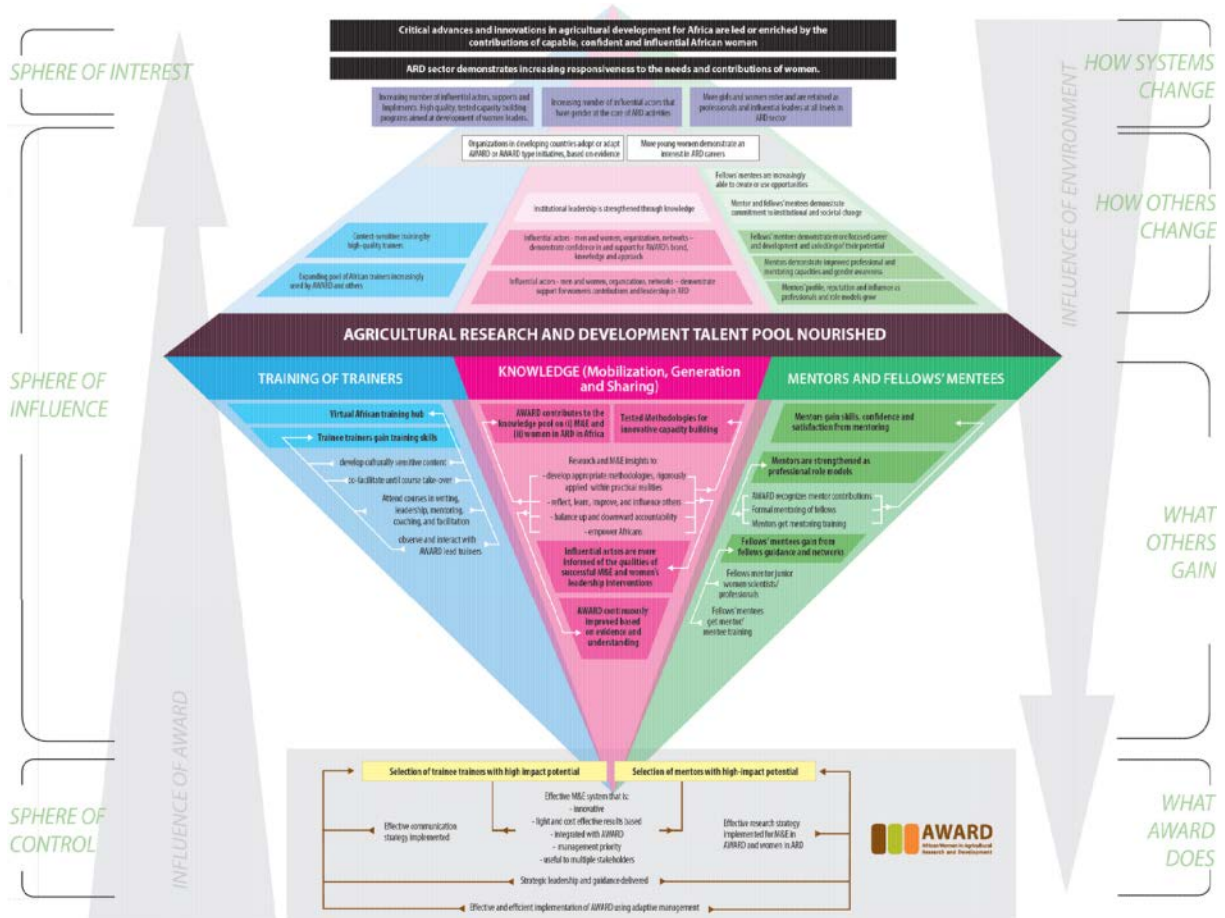


Figure 11: The ripples 'diamond'- aspects of AWARD's theory of change (source: Isabelle Vogel and Zoe Stephenson, 2012)

Figure 11 gives another 2 dimensional example, but sometimes 2-dimensional visualisation might feel limiting, just add another dimension! (See figure 12.)

Some tips

The use of time

Stories need a time perspective. Visualising progress also needs a time perspective or a time frame. ToC processes and the visualisation of ToC processes therefore also need a time perspective. A lot of ToC visualisations lack this timeframe, but we would recommend not to neglect the importance of showing progress against time. People need milestones or reasons for celebration, e.g. when you are on the way from A to B and you know this wonderful fish restaurant is halfway, you have this moment of celebration. Arriving at the restaurant you can celebrate you are half way and you are treated with a fresh fish for lunch! These notions of progress are extremely important to visualise: This is what we expect by that time, this is what we hope to see *then* and this is what we assume to see *at that time*. By reaching these milestones, people are motivated *to act*, it makes your ToC come alive!



Figure 12: 3-dimensional visualisation
(Source: Retolaza, 2011)

Essential elements

What do you need to visualise exactly? Well, of course it is up to your team to decide, but we would recommend to clearly indicate: where are you now; where do you wish to be and when; what can you realistically achieve by when; what are the necessary steps in between to get there (and when do these steps have to be made!); what are the assumptions you make and who needs to be involved where and when.

Conclusion

People find theory much easier to understand, to 'see' and to remember when it is supported by meaningful visualisation. Visualisation helps people to understand more quickly, helps to remember, helps people to get on board, to engage and good visualisation might even stimulate to act! Visualise together because you are user as well as designer in ToC processes. Explore, articulate and share your inner thinking, understand the thinking of others, 'see' assumptions jumping out in your visualisations and use your visualisations to communicate your 'story' to others.

It does not matter how your ToC discussions are visualised or designed, as long as they serve the purpose of facilitating your discussions, facilitating deeper reflection or enhancing insight in the possible pathways from now to your desired outcome. It does not matter how they look as long as everybody involved in the process feels that the narrative of the theory is supported by the visualisation and the visualisation is supported by the narrative. Visualisations need to be most of all useful and not beautiful, they have to be understandable and easily readable, preferably also by those not intensively involved in all discussions of the ToC process. Remember, your visualisation as such facilitates the process and also records outcomes of discussions.

A ToC process is not complete without a good visualisation!

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