

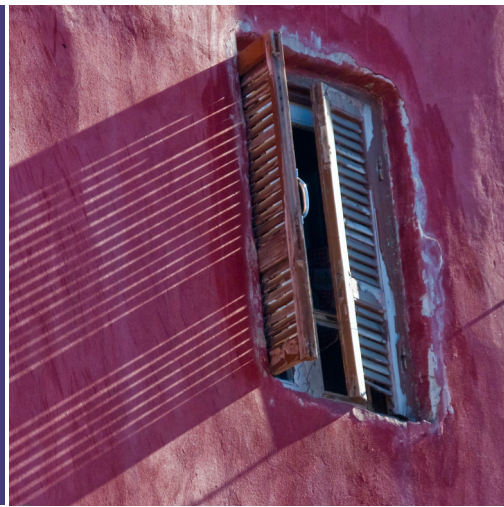
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# Guidance note on Theory of Change

Practice Paper

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## 1. Introduction

This note is one of a series of practical guides to key tools and methodologies used in international development and humanitarian assistance. It provides a brief and practical introduction to Theory of Change (ToC) for Tana staff and associates and draws from recent literature as well as our own experience in applying Theory of Change.<sup>1</sup> It uses Danida terminology from the new Country Programme Guidelines.

Theory of Change is part of the current efforts to sharpen the focus on results and accountability in development assistance. It has been around for at least the past decade but is now featuring extensively in DFID and increasingly in Danida development work. It can be applied to programme design as well as review and evaluation. With its focus on logical pathways, Theory of Change has much in common with Logical Framework Approach (LFA). However, it is regarded as more explanatory and thus potentially more useful as a tool for design, monitoring and review of development programmes.

## 2. What is Theory of Change?

*Theory of Change is a results focused approach to describing the logical pathways or linkages that are embedded in programmes seeking to produce change.*

- Theory of Change is always context related but also reflects beliefs or hypotheses about how change occurs. These hypotheses can be tested and validated/ disproved in relation to the context concerned.
- Theory of Change clarifies the assumptions relating to the context and asks the question “given this set of conditions, the following effect(s) can be expected from this input because of XYZ”.
- For example, *better service delivery by the state leads to improved government legitimacy in turn leading to political stability*. The Theory of Change here is that IF we support the state to deliver better services that reach citizens and meet their needs, THEN the citizens will develop greater trust in their government AND will be less inclined to engage in anti-government behaviour.
- Similar to the logical framework approach, Theory of Change is a way of mapping out the logical sequence of an initiative from input to outcome. However, an important difference is the focus placed on the contextual conditions and the assumptions about how change takes place.
- In this way, Theory of Change becomes a more active process than Logical Framework Approach, which is often criticised as being linear and

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<sup>1</sup> This note draws from Isabel Vogel, *Review of the use of Theory of Change in international development*, April 2012 and Peter Woodrow & Nick Oatley *Practical approaches to theories of change in conflict, security and justice programmes*, March 2013.

mechanistic. Theory of Change requires an explanation of why something will lead to something else. LFA tends to be descriptive while Theory of Change is explanatory. Note: There is a general view that LFA is still necessary.

- Theory of Change should be considered at various levels – i.e. strategic/macro (programme) level, sector level, project level, activity/micro level. At the activity level, specific actions must result in a series of changes that together add up to the project goals, which is itself a contribution to the overall or macro goal.

Level	Use	Focus of Theory of Change
<b>Macro/strategic</b>	Country programme	The expectation of change that informs the choice of priority areas/sectors
<b>Sector</b>	Thematic programme	Why/how will the combined effects of funded projects achieve the desired change at the macro level?
<b>Programme/project</b>	Development engagement	Why/how will reaching the project goal contribute to achieving the sector /higher level goals?
<b>Activity</b>	Project/activity	Why/how will the activity produce the micro changes leading to achievement of project goals?

Country programmes thus consist of various theories of change, which together interact within the context to produce the overall change desired. Note that the “context” concerns the political, security, social, economic and cultural environment within which other “programmes” also exist and interact.

### 3. Elements of Theory of Change

There seems to be general agreement that a Theory of Change should include the following elements:

- Description of context – in which the intervention is located, i.e. the political, security, social, economic, environmental conditions. This should indicate also the problem that the intervention is seeking to change.
- The strategic objective or long-term change that the intervention will support and those that will benefit.
- The logical pathway or sequence or hierarchy of change events that is expected to lead to the desired outcome. This could be from input to short term change to medium term change leading to long-term change.

- The assumptions about how these changes might happen – i.e. “if we do this, then such and such will happen”. In other words, assumptions are the “theories” in Theory of Change.
- There will probably be a hierarchy of change assumptions (like in LFA) – i.e. short term changes (outputs), medium term (outcomes), long term (impact).

#### 4. How to create a Theory of Change

Woodrow and Oatley identify three key steps in developing a theory of change statement:

- Identify the changes expected or desired. *This can be arranged in a sequence (i.e. one change leading to another – e.g. awareness raising leading to advocacy leading to change of attitude amongst decision makers leading to new legislation leading to change in practice etc. etc.) but the reality may also be non-linear and other parallel/external factors will affect the change. Remember: to focus on the results/changes expected and not activities. The target group should be identified.*
- Articulate how the changes will occur as a result of the programming efforts and taking account of the context. For example:

Expected changes	How they will happen
<b>Public opinion shifts in favour of an anti-discrimination law</b>	A campaign of public education and advocacy on public media

- Develop one or more “if X....then Y, because.....” statements. For example:

Expected changes	How they will happen	Theory of Change
<b>Public opinion shifts in favour of an anti-discrimination law</b>	A campaign of public education and advocacy on public media	<b>If</b> the public is provided with accurate and regular information, <b>then</b> they will support fairness in legislation and its implementation <b>because</b> they see it benefits them through providing better access to rights and services.

#### 5. Examples of simple theories of change

The following examples illustrate how simple theories of change can apply at the strategic/macro level and at the programme and project levels. The examples are obviously highly abbreviated and there will be further factors that should be included to make the expected change process realistic. It can be expected that the changes may be *necessary but not sufficient* to achieve the goal. So, there is a

need to consider what else may contribute. We should consider how the combination of efforts will contribute to achieving the goal.

At the country programme (macro) level:

Goal/objective	Expected changes	Theory of Change
<b>Achievement of a more peaceful, democratic, effective, transparent and accountable XXX state that enjoys the support, and meets the needs, of its citizens.</b>	Standards of democracy, governance and services actually delivered at national and sub-national levels strengthens, levels of corruption are reduced, gains in education are maintained and extended, employment and income opportunities are strengthened, standards of human rights (especially relating to women and girls) improved.	If we provide financial and technical inputs to programmes targeting key enabling factors (XYZ), then more effective, inclusive, transparent and accountable government and civil society will develop because citizens will have greater voice and access and duty bearers will have greater capacity to delivery services and respond to rights holders demands.

At the thematic programme (sector) level:

Goal/objective	Expected changes	Theory of Change
<b>By XX, credible elections have been held, medium and long term plans have been agreed and budgeted, PFMR and PSR efforts have resulted in ZZ% improvements in PEFA and TI ratings.</b>	Citizens experience greater interaction with the government and service delivery improves. Trust and confidence increases. Transparency and accountability mechanisms are in place and being used.	If we provide financial and technical inputs to election support, governance reforms, such as PFMR, and support civil society/government interaction that enhances the voice of citizens, then standards of services will improve and service providers will be more accountable because there is increased participation in governance processes.

At the development engagement (programme/project) level:

Goal/objective	Expected changes	Theory of Change
<b>A government that</b>	Voter registration rates	If we provide financial

<p><b>has been elected through a transparent, inclusive, and free process</b></p>	<p>increase and include significantly greater numbers of women, election education and availability/access to ballot boxes increases, election management and complaints processes transparent and accountable, election results delivered on time.</p>	<p>and technical inputs to inclusive and transparent election support programmes targeting national election institutions and civil society mechanisms, then a more accountable electoral process will develop that has the trust and confidence of the electorate because citizens are more involved and able to express their needs and see the effects of this.</p>
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## 6. Contribution of thematic programmes to overall results

As described above, the design of large-scale multi-sector programmes entails the amalgamation of often complex logic chains – and the presentation of the theory of change needs to demonstrate how changes in one sector will influence changes in another. This is illustrated in the following example:

Thematic programme	Cross cutting logic and synergies
<p><b>Governance, democracy and human rights</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthens institutional structures and capacity of government (e.g. through PFM, CBR), enabling better delivery of services, e.g. in education, economic development.</li> <li>• Entrenches and capacitates democratic systems – election, parliament</li> <li>• Improves transparency and accountability, inclusiveness &amp; participation, monitoring, e.g. through AIHRC, MEC</li> <li>• Strengthens non-discrimination, incl. vis –à-vis women</li> <li>• Cross cutting anti-corruption</li> <li>• Supports demand side/rights holders to claim their rights, prioritises gender equality</li> <li>• Sub-national governance</li> </ul>

	strengthens local level participation and service delivery
<b>Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improves access to and capacity of basic services nation-wide</li> <li>• Strengthens individual capacities and ability to contribute and benefit from development</li> <li>• Strengthening gender equality and empowerment of women and girls</li> </ul>
<b>Growth and Employment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic driver of economic development, through agriculture value chain and access to credit</li> <li>• Facilitates job creation, poverty reduction</li> <li>• Strengthening gender equality and women's empowerment</li> </ul>

## 7. DFID's list of questions to assess quality of Theory of Change

The following list of quality markers used by DFID provides some useful food for thought regarding how to make Theory of Change statements clear and specific.<sup>2</sup>

### a. Clear analysis of the context and wider change process sought

- Is it a strategic response to a contextual analysis and assessment of external and internal learning?
- Is it clear on how systemic changes are expected to emerge as a result of the actions of the intervention and other actors and factors in the system?

### b. Clearly articulated vision of change and process of change sought

- Is the vision conceptually clear and specific?
- Is the change process conceptually clear, logical but with non-linearity expressed?
- Are the hypothetical causal pathways mapped, with no missing links, specific to the programme in its context, and not a generic response?

### c. Assumptions are made explicit, categorised and linked to specific aspects

- Have the assumptions been made explicit, in relation to different aspects of the theory of change: about how change is understood to happen - paradigms and worldviews informing this; the enabling and constraining

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from a summary by Maureen O'Flynn, INTRAC



factors; the contextual conditions; other actors, stakeholders and beneficiaries; strategy and implementation options?

- Does the narrative describe key 'pathways' (i.e. the hypothetical sequences of change, sometimes called results or outcomes chains)?
- Does the programme make explicit its 'drivers of change' (i.e. how its interventions interact with the context to influence change)
- Are the strategic options described in relation to the drivers of change?

**d. Assessment of external learning and evidence for key change drivers and cause-effect links**

- Is there a narrative assessment of learning / evidence for key assumptions and change pathways? Is the strength of the evidence assessed?
- Are the aspects that are poorly understood flagged?
- Does the assessment make sense given the sources referred to?

**e. Documentation, communication and wide ownership**

- Are changes in the Theory of Change over time captured and documented?

**f. Active use of Theory of Change in planning, M&E and management processes**

- Is the Theory of Change explicitly used in strategic planning and in the design and practice of M&E?
- Do monitoring and/or evaluation questions pick up on where cause-effect links are poorly understood?
- Are regular reviews and adaptation of the Theory of Change integrated into management process and reviews planned in, at least once a year?

## 8. Use of theories of change

As theories of change apply to development/change processes as a whole, they can be applied throughout the programme cycle – i.e. in design appraisal, review, and evaluation.

In programme, project and activity design, the theory of change approach is broadly as described above. It outlines and checks the expectations and dependencies inherent in the design that are necessary to produce the desired result, which is in turn a product of a contextual and needs based analysis.

In review and evaluation, the theory of change approach would seek to identify and test the overall programme theory of change and the whether the contributing theories of change are necessary and sufficient in the light of the prevailing context. It is not just a question of whether the inputs have produced the expected results but *why* they have or have not.

Assessing the evidence for causal links is a major aspect of Theory of Change approach. It can also help in identifying gaps and inconsistencies. Ask: *Is the process likely to unfold in this way? Are there gaps or leaps of logic? Will each planned activity produce the expected changes in their context? Will doing X produce Y? Is it necessary and sufficient? Collectively, will the singular changes add up to the overall change sought? What else might be needed?*

Use of Theory of Change in programming is tricky the higher up the programme chain one goes due to the dependencies involved. In other words, the validity of Theory of Change at macro level depends upon the validity of the Theory of Change s at programme and project levels, bearing in mind that the latter cases may be part of a much wider effort, including areas beyond the control or influence of the intervention concerned.

## 9. Want know more?

A short and sweet introduction to Theory of Change can be found in Peter Woodrow & Nick Oatley's *Practical approaches to theories of change in conflict, security and justice programmes* (March 2013).

<http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/M-files/CCRVI/CCVRI-theories-of-change-part-1.pdf> This includes numerous practical examples that help to clarify the approach.

Also, Isabel Vogel's *Review of the use of Theory of Change in international development* (April 2012) provides a wider overview, although less practical than Woodrow and Oatley. [http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/pdf/outputs/mis\\_spc/DFID\\_Review\\_VogelV7.pdf](http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/pdf/outputs/mis_spc/DFID_Review_VogelV7.pdf)