

## Learning about Theories of Change and Embedding Reflection

This paper is prompted by our own reflections on Theories of Change (TOC). We have been working with IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre, a number of Research Programme Consortia and the Mobilising Knowledge for Development (MK4D) programme at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), to develop theories of change. Having explored our own ideas, and as a result of a 'learning lab' – our mechanism for reflection – we are sharing these early thoughts and practice, to enable others within the knowledge intermediary sector and beyond to discuss some of the practicalities of developing a Theory of Change.

### Introduction

Our core questions for ourselves were:

- What do we know about Theories of Change (TOC)?
- Are TOC, Logframes and Outcome Mapping (amongst other things) a distraction from the business of embedding learning processes and reflective practice?

The language of 'Theory of Change' is gaining increasing currency within the development community, and indeed some donors such as the Department for International Development (DFID, UK) are pushing for all Research Consortia to present a Theory of Change at the completion of the inception phase. The Theory of Change is said to be a key tool to understand and unpack programmes of work, and perhaps importantly to identify impact in a complex world. We think that perhaps the core reason why Theory of Change is gaining currency is that the development sector needs to be prompted (again) to reflect on its work, and to reflect on whether its work is efficient, effective and will have impact.

In this paper we share the idea that Theory of Change is useful as long as it is viewed as a process not a product. We think it is currently being championed as a tool for reflection and intentional design of programmes. This is partly because the logical framework has become a little tired and mechanistic. We therefore hope the focus remains on reflection, learning and realistic design, not on creating something just please the donor.

In each Practice Paper published, we share our experience and learning. We are presenting ideas that we are exploring and that others in the intermediary sector might like to explore.

Our experiences contribute to the body of knowledge, but rarely if ever contain incontestable insights. This paper should not be read in isolation, and should be seen as complementary to other work conducted on related issues of capacity development, knowledge management, and policy influence.

The knowledge and information intermediary sector comprises those who seek to improve flows of knowledge between actors in decision-making and change processes in order to generate better development outcomes. Intermediaries act in a range of ways: enabling access to information; helping people to make sense of it; and facilitating connections that enable knowledge to be shared between stakeholders. It is a practice sector which cuts across other sectors.

## What is the Theory of Change?

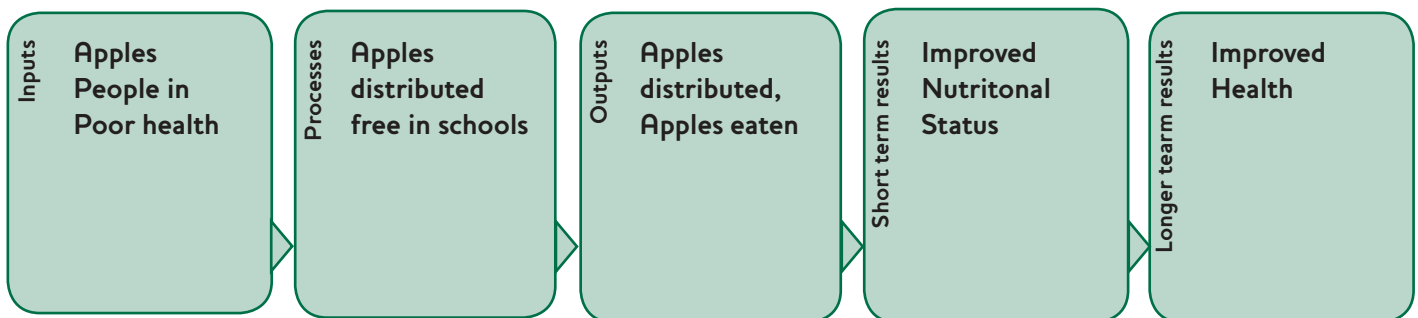
There is a growing literature on the subject and Theory of Change has long existed in evaluation work building on programme theory approaches. It is now in vogue and is in use by lots of people in different ways. For us, the essence of a Theory of Change focuses on the causal mechanisms behind each step on a landscape of change; it focuses on the How and Why question.

**‘Theory of Change uncovers the assumptions we make about what is possible in reaching a long-term goal. TOC also specifies the connections between program activities and outcomes. TOC challenges the designers of complex (community-based) initiatives to be specific about their often implicit theories of how to achieve the change they seek. Doing so both improves their evaluation plans and strengthens one’s ability to claim credit for outcomes predicted in their theory. The TOC approach seems like common sense: lay out the sequence of outcomes that are expected to occur as the result of an intervention, and plan an evaluation strategy around tracking whether these expected outcomes are actually produced.’**

[www.actknowledge.org/theory-of-change/history/](http://www.actknowledge.org/theory-of-change/history/)

In our opinion, the Theory of Change has a considerable strength in its focus on outcomes. We have been working with Outcome Mapping, and have found that a focus on outcomes – an ‘outcome orientation’ – can strengthen a programme. The TOC not only asks the planners to consider what outcomes they are expecting but challenges them to explain, at least in theory, why they believe those outcomes will occur.

Rogers (2011) presents an expanded logic model which explicitly discusses the role of causality. We think that her explanation of this is particularly clear. She describes a thought experiment whereby the English adage ‘an apple a day keeps the doctor away’ is taken and turns into a programme of intervention. Her suggested logic model is as follows:

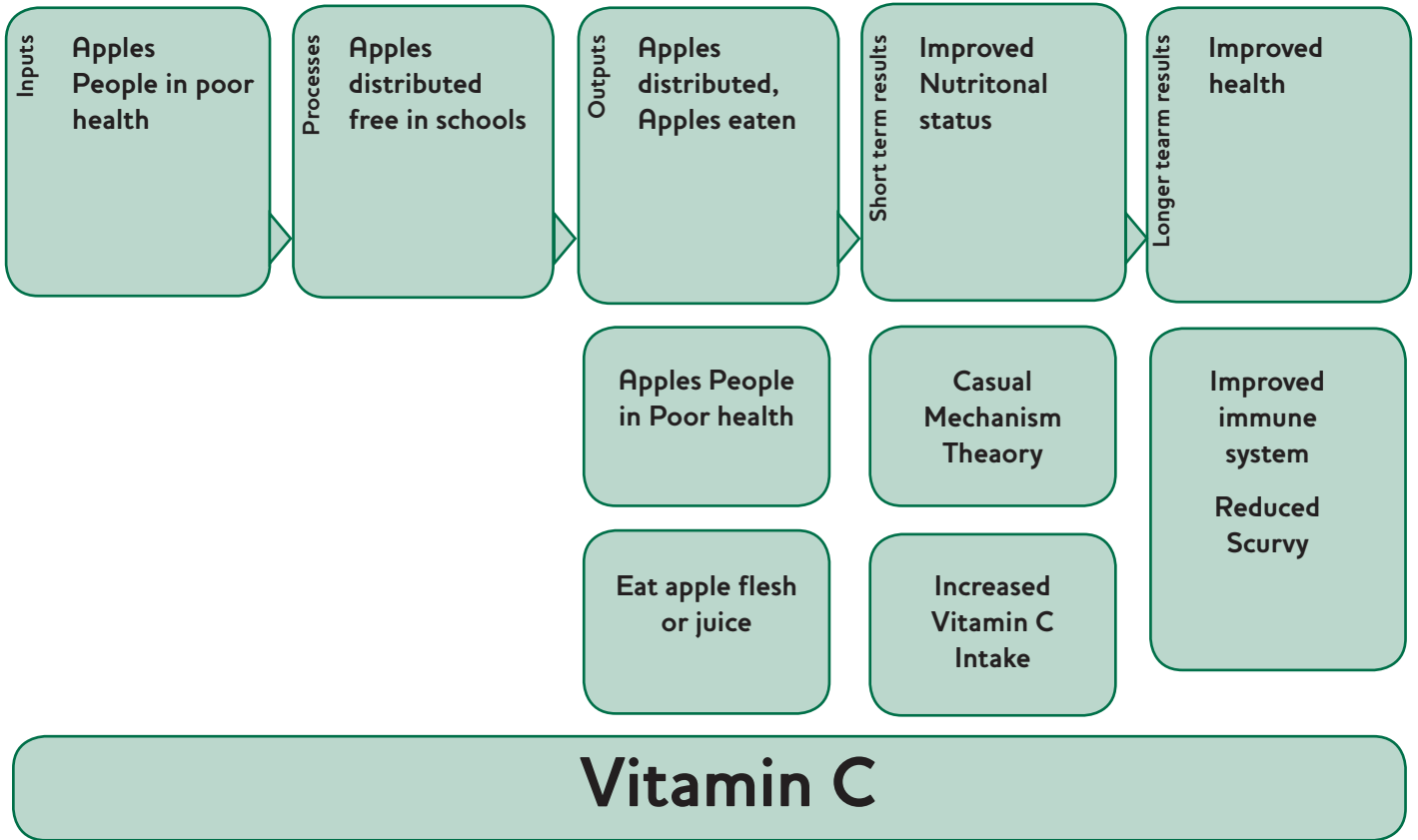


**Figure 1 Logic model for thought experiment on apples**

Source: redrawn from Rogers (2011).

She notes that ‘This has an implicit theory of change about how to get people to eat apples: Causal mechanism theory – increase accessibility, in particular, remove price barriers; and an Action theory – provide free apples to people in poor health. But it has no explicit Theory of Change about how apples improve health.’

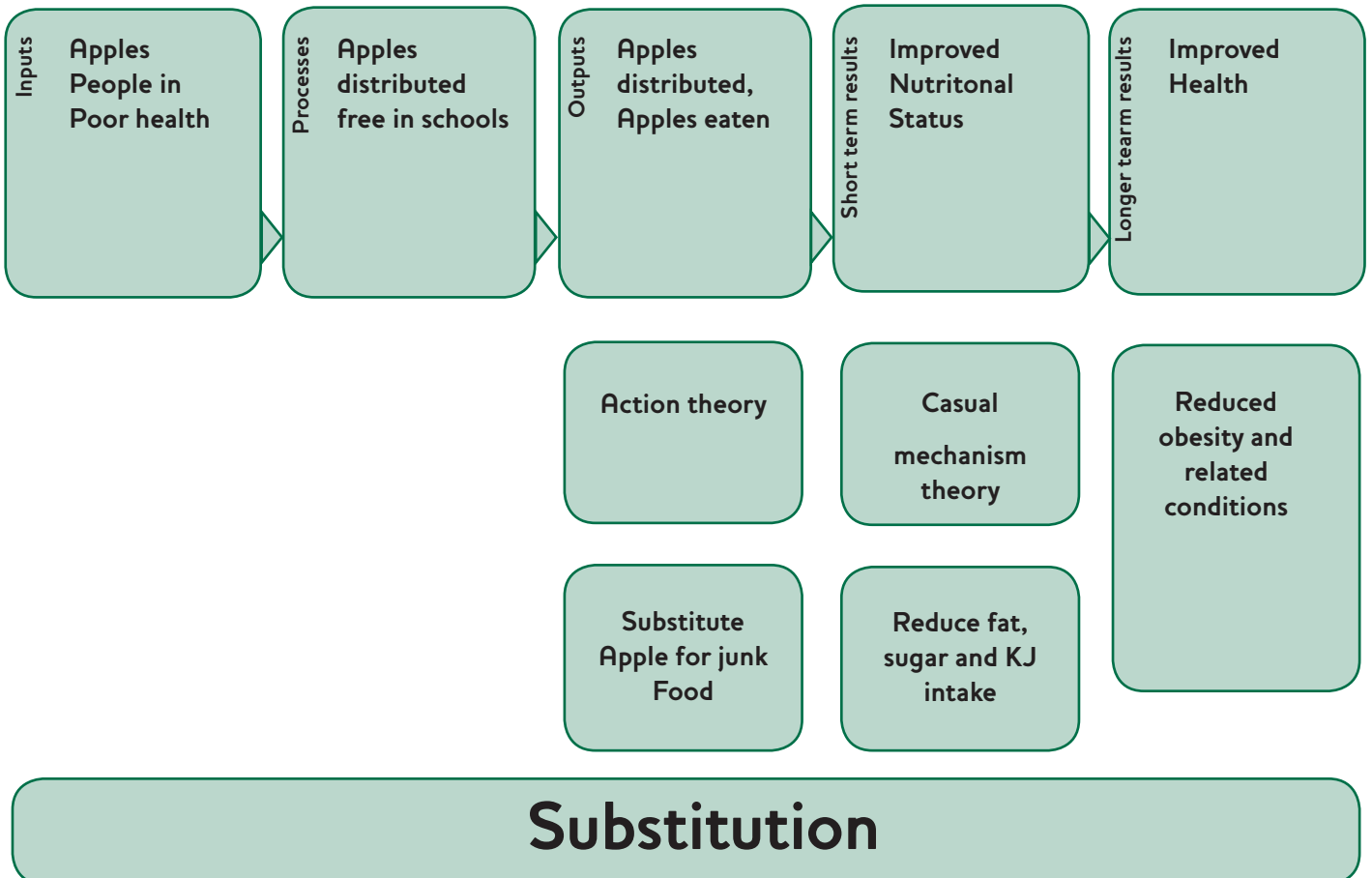
So she suggests creating an explicit Theory of Change, articulating why and how we think apples improve nutritional status and health. Her first focus is on Vitamin C.



**Figure 2** Logic model for thought experiment on apples, with causality

Source: redrawn from Rogers (2011).

This now explicitly states why we think an apple a day contributes to the prevention of disease. However, she then takes the thought experiment further and provides an alternative theory based around substitution of junk food.



### Figure 3 Logic model for thought experiment on apples, with alternative causality

Source: redrawn from Rogers (2011).

These are now two theories of change, and by articulating different causal mechanisms, they potentially lead to different approaches during the programme. Rogers goes on to describe how, IF the causal mechanism is provision of Vitamin C, THEN programmatically oranges might work as well as apples. IF the causal mechanism is substitution of junk food THEN perhaps a range of salads and fruits, even healthy dinners might be appropriate.

To us this seems to illustrate the heart of the Theory of Change approach – it is about explaining the logic model in terms of causal mechanisms. It can help assesses whether the programme approach chosen is the most appropriate use of resources and has evidence to support the programme logic. The causality element of a Theory of Change is for us a key feature.

However, Rogers is building on a logic model, and as we shall discuss below, one of the challenges of a logic model is its relatively linear description of change in a complex world. One of the characteristics of any causal mechanism being described should be that they are true regardless of any programme intervention. For instance, we assume that evidence has shown that increased vitamins in children help protect them from disease – this is true whether there is a programme of intervention to supply vitamins or not. In this sense, it is possible for a Theory of Change to stand slightly apart from a logic model – it could be a collection or collation of all the mechanisms of change relevant to the programme domain – e.g. research and evidence on the key aspects of children's health.

It doesn't have to be linear but could be a collection of pathways through a landscape, or a narrative that describes the desired change (in the above example – improved child health).

There are then two ways to approach or handle a theory of change. As described above, one is to have a logic model of a programme and add to it an explicit mechanism of causality, and therefore create reflection on whether the programme is the best possible response. The second is to collect and collate mechanisms of causality within a programme domain, and then use this to create the programme approach. Before illustrating this latter approach we need to acknowledge that there are many alternatives to presenting Theories of Change. At the moment there is no one way, no definable toolkit or diagrammatic way of describing the TOC, and we think this is a current strength of Theory of Change as it provokes people to think.

To illustrate the use of Theory of Change to create and develop a programme, Figure 4 presents the outcome of a workshop where participants were brainstorming the mechanisms by which they might influence a development sector. The group work presented the linkages between the causal mechanisms as a complex diagram, similar to a problem tree. Such a diagram enabled a discussion about what causes policy to change, about whether policy influence is about champions or evidence, coalitions or relationships, etc. To ground the ideas they used a study (Sumner et al. 2009), to identify the routes through the causal mechanisms. This multiple-path diagram formed a framework within which the team chose a programme approach – the actors were able to choose a pathway, to navigate policy influence through identifying champions rather than say creating a critical mass of evidence. Later this diagram became a narrative to guide the programme of influence (Batchelor and Perkins 2011).

### Theory of Change for TripleS International Workstream

Theory of Change for us then is currently a slightly undefined tool that enables teams:

- to reflect on the grand narratives of change that they are about to engage with;
- to then, within that landscape, position and navigate their programmes;
- to ask key questions about how and why they think change will come about within those programmes of work, and
- in assessing their assumed mechanisms of causality to ask whether they have evidence to support their assumptions and
- to explore whether there are more cost-effective actions that support the same mechanisms that might achieve the same result.

### What distinguishes the Theory of Change from a Logical Framework?

Some Theory of Change sceptics argue that the Theory of Change is no different from a well completed Logical Framework. However we believe that the Theory of Change differentiates itself from the Logical Framework by its

focus on causal linkages. It takes into account the key questions of How and Why. Some will argue that these questions are implicit within a Logical Framework, and that may be the case, but the point is that they are not explicit. In a Theory of Change they should be.

From our point of view, the Logical Framework was introduced for two reasons.

The first was, we think, a very practical administrative reason. Logical Frameworks when first introduced were intended to be one or two pages. They summarised a programme clearly and in a defined format. The alternative was a long narrative. When administrators have to assess tens or hundreds of proposals, a look at the Logical Framework enabled them to do a first sift quickly and efficiently. As the DFID guidelines state: The Logframe 'brings together in one place a statement of all key aspects of the project in a systematic, concise and coherent way; and provides a framework for monitoring and evaluation where planned and actual results can be compared.'

It is this idea that a complex world can be reduced to a four-by-four table that some people are now pushing back against. The second half of that statement, about measurement, is also very topical as aid effectiveness debates challenge that the indicator set of a Logical Framework adequately covers the emerging outcomes of complex programmes. However, as a practical tool for summarising a programme for administration – the Logical Framework was not a bad option.

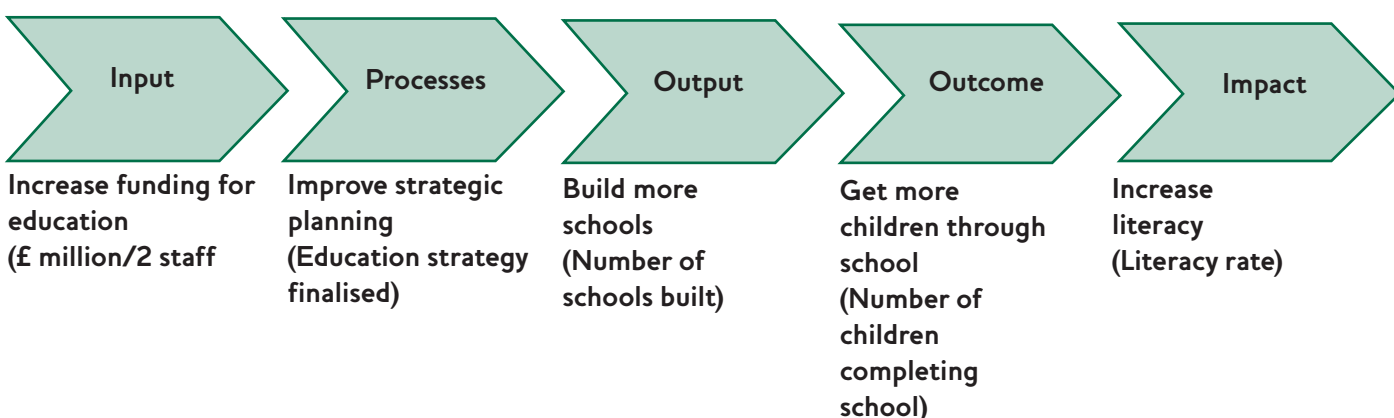
However, in our opinion, the second reason for Logical Frameworks is the more important. As the DFID guidelines state 'It is worth bearing in mind that the logframe comes into play at a very early stage in the project cycle – and can be used as a tool in analysing options for a response through to providing information to be used in an ex-post evaluation of impact.' It goes on to say 'In the process, the logframe will help you and your team to: Achieve stakeholder consensus; Organise your thinking; Summarise and link the key aspects and anticipated impact of your project; Communicate information concisely and unambiguously; and Identify measurable performance indicators and the means of verifying progress.'

This is about process, and process during the planning of a programme. The presence of the Logical Framework within proposals was intended to stimulate the team to reflect on and think through what they wanted to do. To organise thinking. To summarise and link the key aspects. Indeed there is a need for an intervention logic, and a Theory of Change cannot replace an intervention logic.

### Results framework

The Logical Framework is not the only tool that is used to present this. Among donors, and in particular, more widely used in the civil service in the UK is the Results Chain. This too is a stepwise presentation of a logic model.

**Figure 4: DFID Results Chain as an illustration of programme logic**



In their guidance for the Results Chain, DFID make a call for evidence-informed causality as part of the logic model. They state 'The Results Chain must be based on evidence about what has worked in the past, so this is a real opportunity to take account of all the lessons learned, evaluation and research evidence available that underpins the design of the project. The evidence will also enable you to identify realistic targets: how much change does evidence suggest might be achieved over the project period?' This language of 'evidence informed' steps within the Logic Framework relate back to the causality mechanisms discussed in the Theory of Change. Drawing on evidence when designing a programme is important and this guidance is, in theory, prompting reflection on causality and asking for evidential views on causality. This is a version of a Theory of Change.

The result framework model is present in other parts of the UK Government. The health sector in the UK has presented this logic in terms of diagrams that look like the results chain of the DFID Guidance Note. A colleague familiar with these has told us that these logic models are used for planning in much the same way Logical Frameworks are used in the development sector, and are then 'stress tested'. Stress testing means that the causal link between each step is considered, and the evidence that that link will happen is examined in detail. At this point, the 'stress testing' is the Theory of Change. The 'Theory of Change' element is a mechanism to explicitly state the causal connections within the programme of work. The TOC is a useful tool to unpick case-effect relations, assumptions, spillover effects and contextual factors.

The emphasis then is on organising thinking, drawing on evidence in design, reflection.

## The challenges and benefits of being logical

### Linear and prescriptive

To some, the principle difficulty of the logic models are core to their being – they are linear and prescriptive. Their core logic is that if someone provides these inputs, 'we' will be able to complete these tasks which lead to these outputs. The programme logic is that if these outputs are there (with sufficient quality and timeliness), then we will achieve the purpose within the timeframe of the programme. And if that's achieved then in the longer term we will have contributed to this goal. This linear 'this then that' style is said by some to not encompass the complexity of the real world.

By starting with a logic model, and then asking questions about the causality, i.e. building a Theory of Change onto a 'linear' Results Chain, might in many circumstances lose the idea of complexity.

### Living documentation

We should note the idea that the 'Logical Framework is a living document'. This is a phrase that is often used by people defending the logframe against accusations that it is too linear and doesn't allow for a complex world. The idea is that reflection during the programme might challenge some of the logic within the framework, or revisit the indicators of achievement. Many donors will acknowledge that the logical framework can be revisited, and that changes are acceptable – provided it is justified with evidence and data from the real world. However, the use of a Logical Framework as a tool for programme management and delivery can limit the extent to which the logframe can evolve in response to unfolding realities.

### What is the added value of a good Theory of Change?

Let us first acknowledge that unlike the Logical Framework, there is no single format for a Theory of Change. It may take many shapes and forms – a narrative storyline, a set of linked statements, something like a problem tree, a sequence of steps. This is currently its strength because we are finding that since it doesn't have a set of boxes that people can fill in, it makes people think. However it's also its current weakness since some people are confused between Theory of Change and Logical Frameworks.

The Theory of Change differentiates itself from a Logical Framework by placing emphasis much more on a theory. The resulting document is a theory, a landscape of the change, not a roadmap. The pressure to go back and adjust the theory based on what you learn is much more embedded in the process. While we have acknowledged above that Logical Frameworks need to be revisited, and should be living, they often are not. Updating/revisiting one's TOC to consider (signs of) movement towards change is valuable to learning so that it is not a static item, but one which reflects an initiatives evolution.

And the TOC is a process as well as a communication or reporting tool. Even, it is much more than a planning tool. At the moment in the current climate, it creates reflection and questioning around the programme that stimulates thinking. According to their Guidance Notes, DFID are still hoping that developing a Logical Framework is a process of thinking, however we also felt that in reality the development of the Logical Framework is left to a small working group who see it as a box to tick to get the proposal approved.

### Embedding learning – are tools a distraction?

At this point we wondered whether donors asking for Theory of Change was the right approach. IF the core value of any of these processes/tools (Logical Framework, proposal writing, Theory of Change) is to ensure sufficient reflection on the development intervention or treatment, then we need to ask whether these tools have become or are likely to be helpful, or become distractions. Do those submitting proposals create their Logical Framework only to get funding

without really thinking through the logic, or do they use the exercise to generate reflection and buy-in from the whole team? Since our experience is that many programmes develop the Logical Framework as a mechanism to get funds, we wondered whether in time, Theory of Change will just become a similar ‘hoop to jump through’.

DFID, and almost all donors, want people to think strategically about what they are doing and embed processes for reflective learning. We also think these things are valuable. The original intent of the logframe was to get people to think about what they are doing, but it seems to have been misappropriated over time. Our opinion is that the logframe certainly doesn't seem to embed learning practices and often isn't even backed up by strategic thinking.

However we need to ask ourselves the question ‘Is the logframe the wrong tool for the job?’ Or is it something about the implementation of the logframe that has failed? Remember DFID state in their guidelines that logframes are about organising thinking and explaining the links between the key aspects of a project. If the failure is that logframes have become ‘boxes to be ticked’, is Theory of Change a better tool for the job of getting people thinking, and will its implementation be more successful?

Outcome Mapping has also become popular and again perhaps its main contribution at the moment is in getting people thinking. However, again this is a tool that nods towards reflection and learning, and does not explicitly state that the key need of all programmes is to embed learning within their implementation.

### **Getting embedded reflection**

Donors seem to be championing Theory of Change to get people back on track with thinking about what they are doing. As people think about what they are doing, why they are doing it, and what are the assumptions about causality lying underneath their work – the donors hope that programmes become more effective, efficient and have greater impact. However we think that the TOC is a good tool but may not in the long term tackle the heart of the problem – that there is a need to embed learning. At the moment the Theory of Change is so unfamiliar to people that they have to wrestle with the idea and it forces them to think about their programme. This has a limited window of opportunity, and may, over time, evolve into just another exercise to get the funds released. As people become familiar with the ideas behind the TOC, and experts start offering consultancy to develop the TOC for programmes, the key idea behind them – getting people to think – may become as lost as it has with the Logical Framework. Part of the problem (of embedding strategic thinking and learning) is that we culturally like to box things. Years ago the Strategic Learning Initiative (based at IDS) did some work trying to get people to map out parts of a programme logic model loosely on paper. The participants immediately drew in lines to separate parts of the model. Linear ways of thinking are built into education systems and this is a potentially a wider issue given that the world is complex and does not work in linear ways.

Similarly we have tried cartoons to get people to think about what they are doing and why they are doing it. Cartoons are considered childish and thought not to contain complex ideas – and yet as another paper in this series demonstrates (Batchelor et al. 2012), cartoons can carry complex ideas.

Therefore we believe that our community of practice will likely ‘boxify’ the Theory of Change in time and reduce to a linear model.

## **So what are the key points in developing a Theory of Change?**

### **Process, not box ticking**

In essence it is the process of developing a Theory of Change that adds more value for the stakeholders than the actual output of a diagram or narrative. Developing a TOC for someone else defeats the purpose. Commissioning a consultant to facilitate the process may be appropriate, but only – if they use it as a challenge to create dialogue and thinking between the design team and evaluator.

The design processes do not have to be about building a Theory of Change but about uncovering implicit theories of how change happens that are:

- Held by individuals
- Held by a team
- Built into programme design.

These processes will contribute and frame a learning environment.

### **Evidence-informed programme design**

If done well, a Theory of Change can improve programme design. To do this we need to build on evidence. Indeed most Theory of Change should be an incremental build-up of ideas resulting from past work and evidence from other sources. We return to our emphasis on the how and the why. Consider Rogers' example again – what evidence do we have that apples replenish Vitamin C. What evidence do we have that Vitamin C prevents disease? Does it prevent only certain diseases? Is this the most cost-effective strategy for preventing disease our programme could consider? Asking 'how', 'why' and, importantly, 'how do you know?' while constructing a Theory of Change may lead to more evidenced-informed programmes.

### **Taking in complexity**

While a Logical Framework or model can be 'stress tested' for the causality of each step within the logic, a Theory of Change is best when it moves beyond a linear model. Theories of Change can be collections or collations of known causal mechanisms in a programmatic domain or landscape. These landscapes can then be assessed for pathways, and the proposed linear pathways of the logic model can be assessed for their likelihood of success. The evaluation can be not only against the evidence of causality but also for value for money. Would another path navigating through the Theory of Change be a more cost effective way of achieving the same outcome? Theories can be revisited and revised in response to the often unexpected relationships between programme activities and their effects. The original Theory of Change provides a focus for discussions about difference between anticipated outcomes and perceptions of what actually happened and why.

### **Conclusion**

A core question then, for both the development and intermediary sectors is: If what we are talking about is getting planners to think about what they are doing, how and for what purpose/outcome, is it really a question of getting the right tool or of creating the right process? Is the question really about logframe vs Theory of Change, or can we offer a selection of tools and a minimum of structure to help them develop a common language and form their thinking? We believe, and this is the reason for publishing this paper, that there is a danger that all of this focus on strategic planning tools and Theory of Change is potentially distracting attention even further away from embedding learning processes.

In this paper we have suggested that Theory of Change is useful as long as it is viewed as a process not a product. It is being championed as a tool for reflection and intentional design of programmes. This is partly because the Logical Framework has become a little tired and mechanistic; and therefore, we hope the focus remains on reflection, learning and realistic design, not on creating something to just please the donor.



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# Learning about Theories of Change and Embedding Reflection

## About the Impact and Learning Team (ILT)

What makes development research accessible, relevant or appropriate for people outside the research community? Does development research get its due in policymaking and practice? What would be value for money in research communication?

The Impact and Learning Team at IDS are interested in how communication of research brings about change - in particular, what happens when people and technology mediate between researchers and decision makers. We use the term 'intermediary' to describe people and technology acting in this way. We think they play a critical role in making knowledge accessible, relevant and responsive to demand.

The work we are doing in the Impact and Learning Team (ILT) is exploring and testing this assumption using action research. We support people to think about the difference they want to make as well as how they are going to go about it. We draw insights and approaches from IDS's history of research, and the fields of marketing, strategic planning and evaluation, and capacity development.

This Practice Paper is an output from our work.

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