

UNPACKING THE IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: RESOURCE GUIDE 1

Introduction to Theory of Change

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This resource guide is one of a series of four developed to support researchers in international development with key monitoring, evaluation and learning processes, such as Theory of Change and logframes for proposal and project design.

Introduction to theory of change thinking

This resource guide will provide an introduction to:

- the key concepts that support 'theory of change thinking' and how these provide a foundation for developing logframe and monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) systems
- the different dimensions of a theory of change – as a process and a product, a visual and a narrative, and a framework to support learning and adaptation vs accountability and reporting
- how to use a theory of change to support a structured conversation within research consortia on how change happens
- the relationship between theory of change, logframes and impact pathways.

Introduction to theory of change

“ToC [theory of change] is a critical, **multi-stakeholder exploration** of intentions, interests, power and gender relations in order to contribute to social justice, equality, sustainable development. The key question is, **What change, for whom, why – and who says so?**” [authors' emphasis]

(van Es, Guijt and Vogel 2015)

Theory of change is a narrative of change, a **hypothetical projection of the future**. It is both a vision of the future and a plan for how to get there. Both our vision and understanding of how change happens are influenced by our values, experiences and priorities. So a theory of change conversation should be a space to bring stakeholders together to reflect on different perspectives and world views. Such a conversation aims to identify different perspectives and to build consensus and shared ownership of the priorities and processes among the different stakeholders involved in delivering change.

Theory of change has three dimensions

First, it is a theory; it is our **best guess about how change will happen and a road map to help us deliver our intended outcomes**. Theory of change facilitation supports analysis of the context and factors that are relevant to our project or intervention. It aims to ensure that our theory is informed by understanding and evidence – both of the context in which we work and how interventions are expected to lead to the changes we want to see.



Second, it is about change, and change has multiple dimensions. Development research often seeks to identify the drivers that will lead to social or systems-level change. These changes are the result of changes in the behaviour of groups and individuals. Change in behaviour also has various dimensions; it can be internal or external, collective or individual.

Third, it is a space to acknowledge the unpredictability of change. Change processes are uncertain, complex, and involve interacting dynamics of multiple forces and stakeholders at multiple levels. A theory of change does not offer any guarantees. Instead, it provides a space to articulate our assumptions about how change happens that can provide a useful foundation for reflection and learning.

Theory of change thinking requires finding the right balance between embracing complexity and systems thinking in order to develop a model or road map for change that provides clear and easily communicable pathways for project implementation.

Theory of change as both a product and a process

Theory of change should be a facilitated **process** that brings stakeholders together to build common ownership and understanding of project objectives and outcomes. This **process** aims to help project stakeholders better understand the system they are part of and explore the multiple dimensions and perspectives of change in order to develop a model or road map for change and make strategic decisions on the best route forward.

This model or road map becomes a **product**, which is usually developed early in the project cycle and is used to guide strategic implementation decisions. It also provides the foundation for the logical framework or logframe (see Guide 3) and for the MEL approach (Guide 4).

This product usually has both a **visual** and a **narrative** element:

- The narrative will be a short statement that summarises how the intervention is intended to work. In research proposals, this narrative statement is also called a **pathway to impact**. It should start by outlining the problem or challenge that the project will address and then set out what change will look like and how the project will contribute to that change. The narrative **should not** start by outlining the activities and outputs.
- The **visual** is usually a diagram with a series of boxes and arrows that correspond to a project's intended outputs, outcomes and impacts. Ideally, a theory of change visual will be both clear and comprehensive, capturing the key outcome areas and the causal linkages between different types of project intervention. A visual with too many boxes and arrows can quickly become complicated and confusing. A wide range of examples can easily be found by searching 'theory of change' on Google images.

A theory of change should not be static. It provides a map of the changes we would like to influence through the project. Once we set out along the road, our understanding of the context and challenges will continue to evolve; external forces might interrupt our plans, or we could identify new pathways that we had not considered in our original conversations.

Theory of change should provide a framework to support learning and adaptation through an ongoing and iterative process of reflection. This requires creating spaces to bring stakeholders back together to revisit their original Theory of Change products and test the assumptions previously made. Thinking of theory of change as a process encourages project teams to reflect on how their approach is evolving in reality so that they can review, adjust and improve their implementation strategy to meet the identified outcomes.



Theory of change and logframes: what’s the difference?

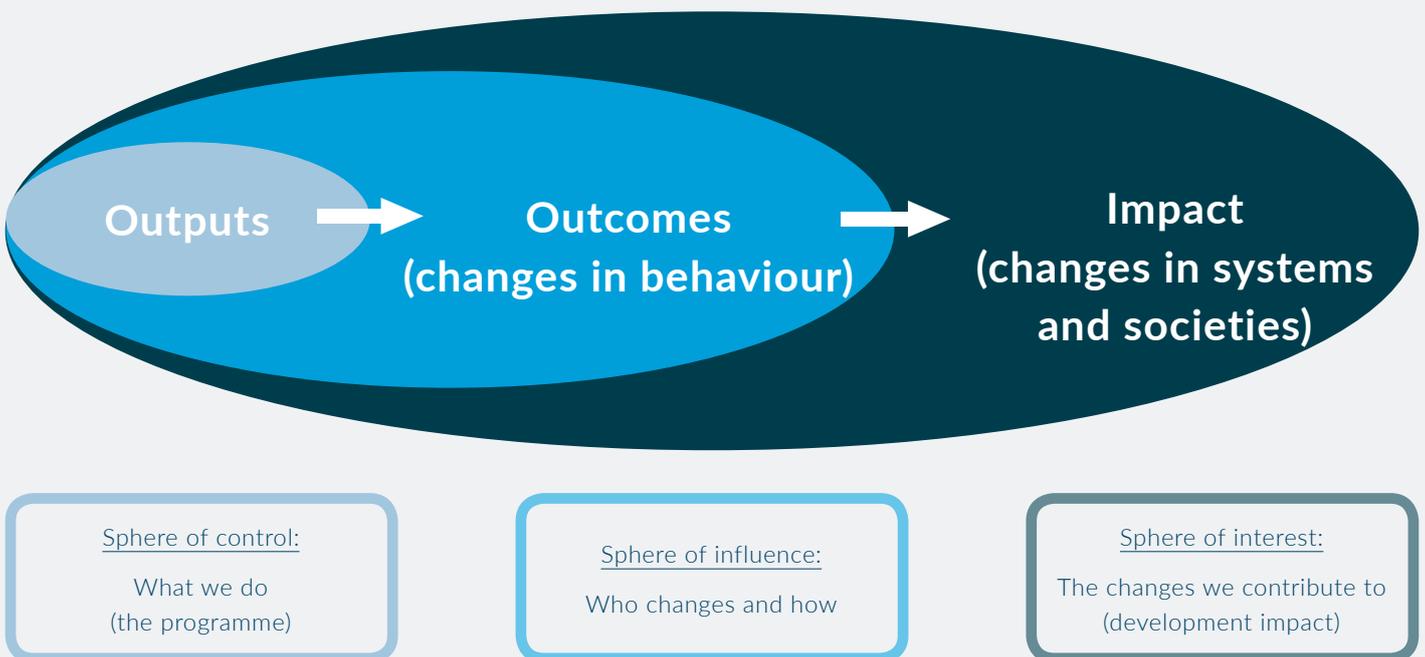
One of the most common MEL questions is ‘What is the difference between a theory of change and a logical framework?’ In reality they are quite similar; a theory of change emphasises learning, while a logframe emphasises accountability. However, there is considerable overlap between the two.

Logframes will be covered in more detail in Resource Guide 3. They provide a linear vision of change from outputs to outcomes to impact. Theory of change emerged as a reaction to this linearity, to better represent the complex, uncertain and iterative nature of change processes. However, most theory of change visuals look like colourful versions of a logframe and are often presented as a left-to-right continuum of outputs, outcomes and impacts. If done well, a theory of change process will inform the development of a logframe and project indicators and the two need to be consistent with each other.

Identifying impact pathways: from outputs to outcomes to impact

A theory of change process should help a project team to identify a clear vision of their desired impact and identify the key outcomes that will support this change. Working backwards from the outcomes then informs the activities and outputs that a project will deliver. In increasingly competitive funding environments and complex consortium-led projects, the boundaries between these concepts are not always clear. A useful way to think about the continuum from outputs to outcomes to impact is to think about spheres of control, influence and interest.

Figure 1 - Spheres of interest, influence and control. Inspired by Montague, S. (2000) [Circles of Influence](#). Reproduced with author’s permission.



- **Sphere of interest** is the challenge or problem that helps us to frame our intervention; it corresponds to the impact vision of a theory of change.
- **Sphere of influence** is the changes we hope to influence through the intervention, focusing on changes in behaviour among different groups of actors, including partners, key stakeholders and beneficiaries (see Resource Guide 2).
- **Sphere of control** is the factors within our control – that is, what we will do and what we will produce with project funds. This is associated with outputs in the theory of change and logframe.



A good theory of change process will help project partners to think about the steps or causal linkages between each of these three stages. This requires making assumptions about how project activities and outputs will lead to outcomes, and how these outcomes will contribute to broader changes within society. Theory of change provides us with a structured approach to articulate and test those assumptions:

To understand **how and if an intervention is working**, we need to understand how the activities of the intervention are **expected** to lead to the desired results— both (a) the causal pathway from activities to outputs to a sequence of outcomes to impacts and (b) the causal assumptions showing **why and under what conditions the various links in the causal pathway are expected to work** [emphasis added].

(Mayne 2015)

Theory of change and impact pathways: what's the difference?

What is the difference between a theory of change and an impact pathway?

Terms like 'theory of change', 'logframes' and 'impact pathways' are often used interchangeably and can be confusing. Some experts interpret an impact pathway and a theory of change as one and the same thing, while for others, a theory of change may contain multiple 'nested' pathways. This latter definition is used throughout these resource guides. What terminology is used will depend on the context and complexity of the change process involved. Providing clarity and consistency is key; the terms used should not detract from the essence of the process.

Theory of change is about promoting critical thought and reflection, to develop, test and revisit how we think change happens and how research can contribute to that. A theory of change should contain a series of pathways that represent hypotheses about how we think the research we conduct will be used, by whom, and how this will support changes in behaviour of key groups and ultimately contribute to broader impact.

Putting this into practice

The next resource guide in this series, Guide 2, sets out seven steps to developing a theory of change. It also suggests a series of tools to support reflection and focus discussions within a specific context and area of work. The seven steps include a facilitated process to outline the project vision, identify key stakeholders and the types of changes they want to influence, and help all involved make the assumptions on causal linkages more explicit in their thinking.

References

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