UNPACKING THE IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: RESOURCE GUIDE 2

Seven Steps to a 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.

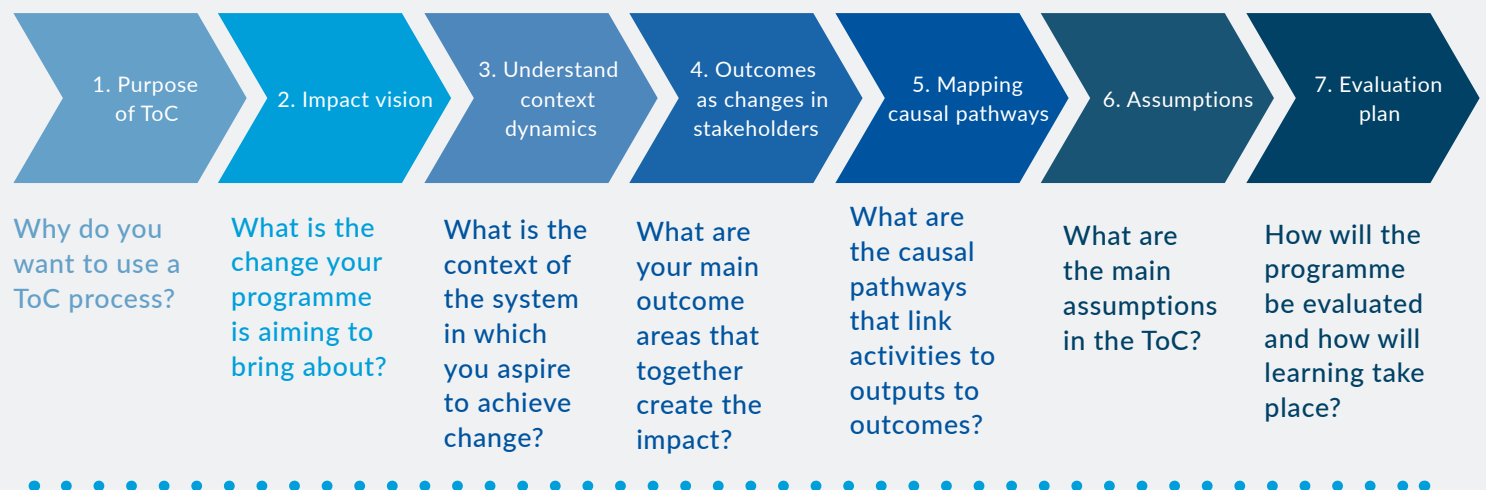This resource guide will provide an introduction to:

- being clear on the purpose of a theory of change

- framing the vision of change as the starting point for theory of change conversations

- practical tools such as problem tree analysis and stakeholder mapping, to identify power imbalances and build consensus among partners on the most relevant problems and people to consider when developing a theory of change

- understanding the multiple dimensions of change and defining the types of change the project would like to influence

- mapping of causal pathways and articulating assumptions around how change happens.

Seven steps to developing a theory of change:

The seven steps involve a structured process for developing a theory of change and provide a framework to engage project partners and other key stakeholders in a conversation to build consensus around project objectives and approach. The steps have been adapted from the Hivos approach, which provides a useful and much more comprehensive set of guidelines for developing a theory of change (van Es, Guijt and Vogel 2015).

This resource guide explores each of the seven steps in more detail. Each step starts by asking a question and then aims to provide the information that will support those involved to reflect on the right answer for their specific context.

Figure 1 - The seven steps to developing a theory of change (ToC). Source: author's own adapted from van Es, Guijt and Vogel (2015)

1. Purpose of ToC	2. Impact vision	3. Understand context dynamics	4. Outcomes as changes in stakeholders	5. Mapping causal pathways	6. Assumptions	7. Evaluation plan
Why do you want to use a ToC process?	What is the change your programme is aiming to bring about?	What is the context of the system in which you aspire to achieve change?	What are your main outcome areas that together create the impact?	What are the causal pathways that link activities to outputs to outcomes?	What are the main assumptions in the ToC?	How will the programme be evaluated and how will learning take place?

Step 1: Agree the purpose of a theory of change

Why use a theory of change process?

A theory of change can be used in several different ways. For example:

- **As a design and consensus-building tool**: At the design phase, the theory of change helps to build common understanding, agreement and ownership among stakeholders of the key objectives and outcomes. It can also highlight where there might be differences in opinion, and encourage conversations to explore different perspectives and build consensus on the most appropriate approaches and pathways. Theory of change aims to create a space to develop a map of where the project is going and to encourage an open conversation on the assumptions that are being made to build a common vision of how change happens and the necessary preconditions for success.

- **As a planning tool**: Once elaborated, the theory of change provides the basis of the implementation plan, highlights the stepping stones on the pathway to change, and enables teams to plan the activities that will get them started on the journey.

- **As a communication tool**: The theory of change product provides a visual reference point and a narrative summary of the proposed change process and preconditions for success. This can help the project team to identify clear messages about the intended outcomes and delivery strategies, which can be used to explain the project and build buy-in among other stakeholders.

- **As a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tool**: A theory of change conversation helps define the types of changes a project is trying to achieve and the key audiences and groups it wants to influence; this should form the basis of the outputs, outcomes and impacts of the logframe.

- **As a reflection and adjustment tool**: The theory of change assumptions also provide the foundation of the project's learning agenda and provide a framework to test whether assumptions are valid, and how evolving contextual factors (preconditions) influence objectives and implementation strategies. Used well, theory of change should support a dynamic process of reflection and review to aid understanding of how the impact pathways identified have evolved based on the experiences of those implementing the project. This learning should then inform further adjustments and improvements.

Step 2: Define the vision of change

A theory of change facilitation process should start with the desired impact and work backwards to define the outcomes and outputs necessary to achieve that. Impact is the high-level vision of change.

For some people engaged in research, this requires a slight conceptual shift in thinking – from starting with the research and how this will be disseminated and used, to identifying a key problem or challenge, and then outlining how the proposed research will contribute to addressing that challenge.

The starting point for a theory of change should be:

What is the nature and scale of the problem or challenge to be addressed through the research?

The vision of change should provide a suitable frame to demonstrate how the research will contribute to solving the particular problem or challenge. It needs to be ambitious, but acknowledge that this is not a problem or challenge that one organisation or project can solve on its own. The emphasis should be on the contribution that the research project can make to the bigger picture.

Start by asking the project team: *What does success look like?*

Ask the project team to imagine the project epitaph or an awards ceremony, and to ask themselves: *What is the change in the world that this work will have contributed to?*

This exercise should provide an opportunity for different voices and perspectives to be heard and will probably require some negotiation and iteration before everyone involved is happy with and feels ownership of the proposed vision of change.

Step 3: Understand contextual dynamics

The next step is to explore the dynamics of the context the project will operate in, by considering:

What is the context and key dynamics of the system in which the project aspires to achieve change?

This section describes three common facilitation tools that can help the project team reflect on their context. The aim at this stage is to get as much information as possible and explore the problem from as many perspectives as possible. This will ensure that the identified pathways to impact are based on a solid understanding of the context in which the project will be implemented.

Tool 1: Problem tree analysis

This tool supports groups to break down the problem or challenge they are seeking to address into manageable and definable chunks so as to prioritise factors and focus objectives. It helps stakeholders think about cause and effect and improve understanding of the problem – and often its interconnected and sometimes contradictory causes – to help identify potential solutions or pathways. The focus should be on the present situation to understand the context in which the project will be intervening.

Through a facilitated conversation, problem tree analysis helps groups identify the central issues and arguments, and establish who and what the political actors and processes are at each stage. It will also reveal whether further information, evidence or resources are needed to make a strong case, or build a convincing solution. The purpose is to build a shared sense of understanding, purpose and action through a process of discussion and analysis.

Problem tree analysis is best carried out in small groups and in two stages.

- *Stage 1*: Discuss and agree the problem or issue to be analysed. The problem can be broad, as the problem tree will help break it down. Write down the problem or issue in the centre of the flip chart, to become the 'trunk' of the tree. This becomes the 'focal problem'. The problem should be an actual issue everyone feels passionate about, described in general terms.

- *Stage 2*: Identify the causes of the focal problem (these become the tree roots) and then the consequences (which become the branches). These causes and consequences can be created on Post-it Notes or cards, perhaps individually or in pairs, so that they can be arranged in a cause-and-effect logic.

After the group has completed their problem tree, they should take time to reflect on the following questions:

- How well does this represent reality? Are there any economic, political and socio-cultural dimensions that have been missed?

- What are the most serious consequences? What are the trends and tendencies?

- Which causes are easiest or most difficult to address? What possible solutions or options might there be? What types of change are needed?

- What can we do and what can we not do? What does this tell us about a possible way forward? Can we agree on any actions and strategies?

For more information on problem tree analysis, see Hovland 2005.

Stakeholder mapping

Social change depends on behavioural change, so any effort to change behaviour needs to start by identifying and understanding the different groups that are relevant to the problem being addressed. There will probably be numerous actors and interest groups beyond local partners and the project beneficiaries, so identifying the broad range of stakeholders should be central to the theory of change process.

Tool 2: Alignment and Influence matrix

This is a facilitation tool to encourage reflection on how different stakeholders are aligned with the research ideas and the problem being addressed to identify potential partners, audiences and beneficiaries. It is a relatively straightforward tool that starts by brainstorming all actors or stakeholders relevant to the research problem.

Groups then reflect on the relative alignment and influence of these actors in relation to the vision of change, positioning them on the matrix presented in Figure 2. Groups should reflect on:

- the alignment axis: *how likely is this actor to be an ally or opponent of the change being promoted?*

- the influence axis: *how much power or influence does this actor have to support or block the change being promoted?*

Figure 2 - Alignment and Influence Matrix
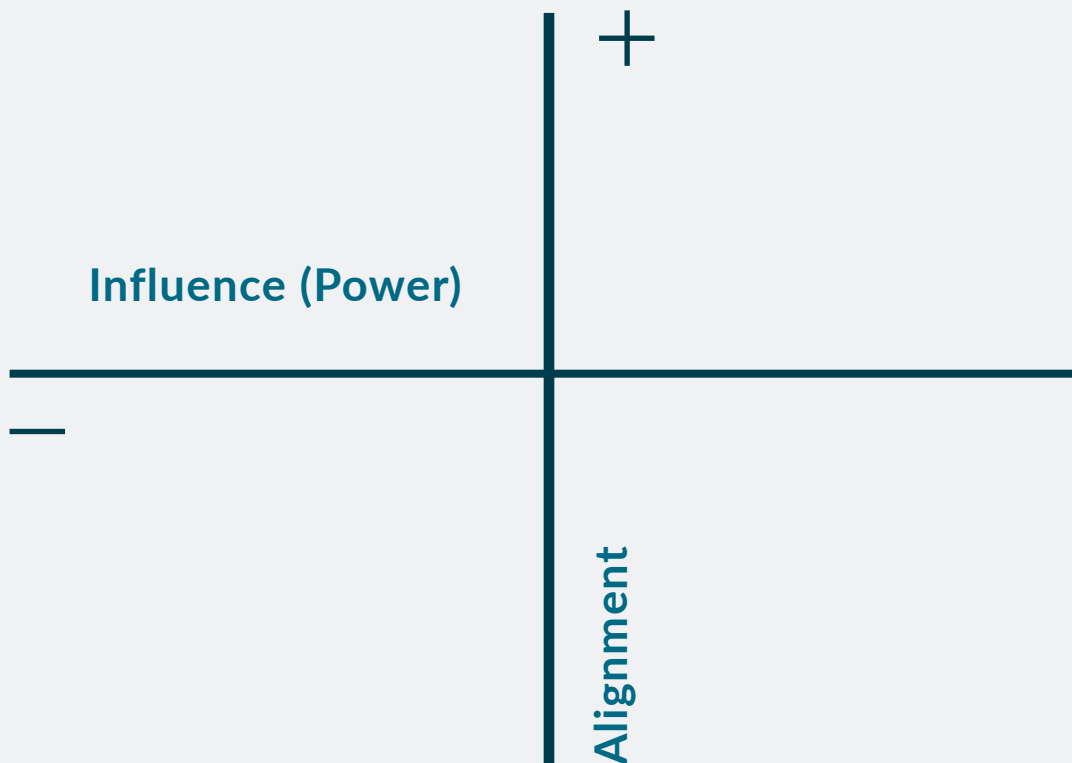
The conversation should uncover as many stakeholders as possible. It may not, of course, be possible to work with them all but it is important to identify the broad range of interest groups who have a stake in the issue. Once all stakeholders have been added to the matrix, the next stage is to reflect on who needs to be involved and how. Depending on their position in the matrix, the following box includes some guidance on how they might be involved.

Weak alignment – strong influence	Strong alignment – strong influence
Target audiences; is there potential to build their interest in the research?	Good potential partnerships or strategic alliances
Weak alignment – weak influence	**Strong alignment – weak influence**
Of limited relevance unless there is a strategy to increase their interests or influence	Target audiences; keep them informed. Consider strategies to increase their influence

Tool 3: Network mapping

Network mapping is based on the idea that change happens as a result of building relationships. It helps us to identify and understand the balance of power among the actors we want to influence and develop strategies to build relationships and partnerships. This exercise uses the same stakeholders identified for the alignment–influence matrix but now encourages groups to consider their relationships to explore the power dynamics from a different perspective.

Groups should reflect on the different types of connections between each other and draw network maps to represent these relationships. This network view of stakeholders can provide important insights into the systemic nature of change. It can also help to reflect on the following key questions:

- How can the existing network and relationships help the project or programme reach its intended audiences and outcomes?

- Where do relationships need to be strengthened or built to reach the intended outcomes?

- How can the project or programme use the network to access and influence powerful actors (strong influence–low alignment) that partners do not have direct relationships with?

- Where might there be potential for tension or conflict? Where might there be a bottleneck to sharing key findings and messages to reach the right audiences?

Linking stakeholder mapping to knowledge and engagement

The network mapping exercise can also provide insights to support work around knowledge exchange and impact. In the context of international development research, each group will interact with the research in a different way. This reflection on how different groups of stakeholders are connected, and the implications of this, can provide insights into how they access and use the research.

Consider:

- Who do you expect to use the research?

- How will they access it?

- What action do you expect them to take after accessing the research?

- Will all stakeholders want to access the research in the same format?

- Might they all be expected to act in the same way?

- What are the project or programme's assumptions about how different groups will engage with and act on the research?

The resources section includes many more facilitation techniques that can help to gain a broader perspective of context.

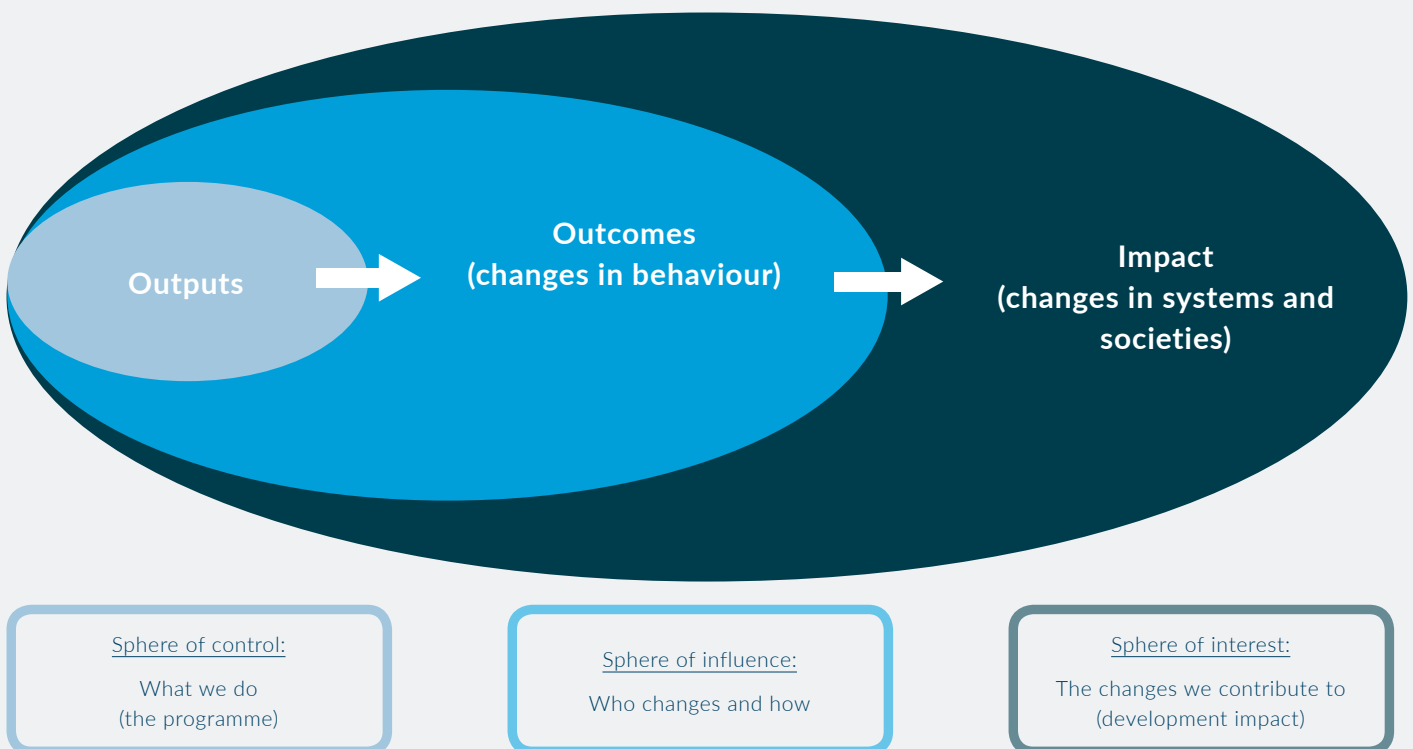## Step 4: Defining outcomes as changes in stakeholders

The next step in the process is to use the information from the context analysis to start to focus on the different changes the project will promote, in order to answer this question:

What are the main outcome areas that together create impact?

At this stage it is useful to reflect again on the spheres of control, influence and interest (see Resource Guide 1). Defining outcomes is about identifying the specific changes in behaviour that the project or programme is trying to promote among specific groups of stakeholders.

Changing behaviours of different groups is key to achieving broader system-level or social change. So to define outcomes, it is useful to reflect on the question: *who needs to be doing what differently for the impact to be achieved?*

Figure 3: Spheres of interest, influence and control. Inspired by Montague, S. (2000) Circles of Influence**. Reproduced with author's permission.**

Outputs

Outcomes
(changes in behaviour)

Impact
(changes in systems and societies)

Sphere of control:
What we do
(the programme)

Sphere of influence:
Who changes and how

Sphere of interest:
The changes we contribute to
(development impact)

Changes in behaviour can be broken down into knowledge, attitudes and practice (KAP):

- Knowledge/capacity – what will stakeholders know and be able to do?

- Attitudes – how is their attitude different now to how it was to begin with?

- Practice – what will they do differently now?

Outcomes can also be defined at the institutional or collective level – for example, a change in a policy or procedure.

The KAP matrix is a useful facilitation tool to identify the types of changes a project or programme might want to see among different groups of stakeholders. This enables groups to reflect on how behaviour change happens, and can uncover a lot of assumptions around how different audiences are expected to act and react as a result of the research. It will not be feasible to reflect on the KAP matrix for all the stakeholders identified, but the alignment–influence matrix should help in prioritising these.

Figure 4: KAP matrix

Actors	Change in knowledge (Knowing)	Change in attitude (Thinking)	Change in practice (Doing)
Policy actors			
Local authorities			
Local research organisations			
Community organisations			
Civil society groups			

It is useful to reflect that changes in practice often need both a shift in knowledge and attitude. This is particularly relevant in the context of conversations around research dissemination. The importance of attitude is often overlooked and can unearth many assumptions around how change happens.

Step 5: Mapping impact pathways through causality

The next stage is to start to identify the causal or impact pathways. This is about finding a path through the complex system map that has been created through the context and stakeholder analysis. The changes identified in the previous step become stepping stones on the pathway to change. This helps to identify the actions the project needs to take to promote these changes. Reflect on this question:

What are the causal pathways that link outputs to outcomes to impacts?

The analogy of a map is useful to think about the different causal pathways, but there are no shortcuts at this stage. It is about pulling together all of the insights from the previous steps.

> First, start with the vision of change: what outcomes need to be in place to see this type of impact?
>
> Then, consider what outputs you need to achieve these outcomes.
>
> Once you have created a chain, go back in the opposite direction to check that the logic is plausible... For example: if we produce [output x], then we will see [outcome y] and if we see [outcome y], then that will contribute to [impact z].

This is best done as a facilitated process, using Post-it Notes so that you can map out the different pathways that emerge and reflect on how and where they overlap.

Step 6: Making assumptions explicit

What are the main assumptions in the theory of change?

Change pathways are only strong if the assumptions that underlie them and their causal logic are plausible. Once the causal pathways have been identified, it is important to take time to reflect on the assumptions and think about the evidence that supports the causal linkages being made.

- What empirical evidence is available from similar prior interventions?

- How do the different experiences and expertise of project partners inform the thinking about how change happens and how specific pathways will deliver the intended outcomes?

A causal pathway does not have to be entirely based on evidence of what works. Remember, this is a hypothesis of how change happens and articulating assumptions helps to define what is new about the current approach.

When thinking about assumptions, it can be useful to distinguish between causal and contextual assumptions:

- Contextual assumptions are about the external context – for example, 'about political commitment (or lack thereof) to building an enabling policy environment'.

- Causal assumptions are about the causal links in the pathway – for example, 'through co-producing new course material, academic and teaching staff will improve their capacity and motivation to engage students and improve results'.

Assumptions should be documented and form the basis of the learning agenda for the project or programme, so that when stakeholders reconvene, they can reflect on how these assumptions have been tested by the interventions and whether and how they have been validated or if adjustments need to be made based upon new understanding gained through implementing the project.

Step 7: Evaluation plan

The information from the previous six steps should inform the elaboration of the logical framework and MEL approach. This will be covered in more detail in resource guides 3 and 4.

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