



USING A THEORY OF CHANGE IN PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

What is a theory of change? A theory of change articulates the underlying assumptions and hypotheses of the project and explains how the activities that are undertaken as part of a project contribute to a chain of results that leads to its intended impacts.

How is a theory of change used? A theory of change helps to create a coherent narrative about a project and the way project resources and activities will bring about a specific impact in the world. In addition, it is useful in communicating with partners and external stakeholders and provides a consistent point of reference for those both involved in and implementing the project.

A theory of change is also useful for monitoring and evaluation, including by helping teams to:

- Identify key evaluation questions;
- Define monitoring indicators;
- Reveal gaps in available data;
- Prioritize additional data collection; and
- Provide a structure for data analysis and reporting.

What should a theory of change include? A theory of change is more than a list of activities with arrows to intended outcomes or impacts. It should also explain how these changes are expected to come about. In that sense, a theory of change generally identifies both the causal mechanisms by which change is expected to come about and the specific resources and activities designed to activate that change.

A project might, for instance, propose capacity development (change theory) as an important means to bring about a specific impact – and then articulate how specific trainings, skills, tools, or resources provided by the project are expected to build appropriate capacity (action theory).

In addition, a theory of change should reflect:

- Inputs or contexts in which the project is operating
- Relevant assumptions
- The role of other or relationship to other projects or programs
- Potential unintended outcomes or impacts

Building a theory of change. A theory of change should draw on a range of evidence (e.g., previous similar projects and programs, previous research and evaluation, the mental models of stakeholders, etc.) that can be gathered and synthesized in a variety of ways. It is important to ensure that the process is inclusive of relevant perspectives, values, and evidence.

Key questions for discussion include:

- What problem is the project trying to address?
- Who will benefit from the project? (target population)
- What impacts are expected? (impacts)
- What are barriers to achieving these impacts? How will the project overcome these? (activities, outputs)
- What is the measurable effect of these activities? (outcomes)



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- How will these effects lead to impact?
- What inputs or resources will the project provide? (inputs)
- What beyond the project will be needed to achieve these results (context, boundary actors)? Who or what will provide this?
- What might be some negative impacts from the project (unintended impacts)? How might these come about? What might be done to reduce the risk of these?
- Why do you believe your theory will bear out (assumptions)?

Additional questions for discussion may include:

- Was the theory developed with adequate evidence and consultation?
- What does this project look like when it is working well? What do you think makes it work well in this case?
- What impacts has the project created?
- What is it about the project that makes a difference?

Reviewing a theory of change. While it's important to develop a theory of change at the beginning of a project, it's possible the theory will change over the course of the project. Some interventions, for instance, cannot be fully planned in advance, as they will require additional research or will operate in settings where implementation has to respond to emerging barriers and opportunities. Other times, a planned intervention will meet unforeseen external challenges that will require changes. In each of these contexts, it will be important to revise the theory as new perspectives and evidence becomes available.

Definitions. A few terms are defined below.

Terms	What does this mean?
Inputs	What resources (human, financial, equipment, etc.) will the project rely on, whether they are supplied by the project or not?
Activities	What specific activities will the project engage in in order to bring about intended outputs, outcomes and impacts?
Outputs	Did we do what we said we were going to do?
Outcomes	Did our efforts lead to a change in knowledge or behavior?
Impacts	Did our efforts lead to changes in state? (e.g., hunger, air pollution, etc.)
Influence & leverage	Did our efforts contribute to changes in the way that other organizations / work or allocate funding?



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What problem are you trying to address?	Who will benefit from the project? (target audience)	What steps are needed to bring about change? (activities, outputs)	What resources will these steps rely on? (inputs)	What will be the near-term effects of these activities? (outcomes)	What impacts will these produce? (impacts)
Key assumptions (e.g., related to context, boundary actors, causal connections)	Key assumptions (e.g., related to context, boundary actors, causal connections)	Key assumptions (e.g., related to context, boundary actors, causal connections)	Key assumptions (e.g., related to context, boundary actors, causal connections)	Key assumptions (e.g., related to context, boundary actors, causal connections)	Key assumptions (e.g., related to context, boundary actors, causal connections)