

Theory of Change Literature Summaries

[Vogel, I. \(2012\). ESPA guide to working with Theory of Change for research projects. LTS/ITAD.](#)

A guide to be used by research teams looking to work with a ToC approach when developing pathways to impact and impact strategies. Offers a tailored approach to developing ToC for ESPA research projects and provides practical tips and resources for those wanting to learn more about ToC.

- Defines ToC as dialogue-based process intended to describe a series of events that are expected to lead to a particular desired outcome - this is captured in a diagram and narrative to provide a guiding framework for research/project team and stakeholders
- ToC most effective when it is used throughout the project cycle - ToC helps to guide stakeholder engagement, communication, co-production strategies and M&E progress towards impact within the lifetime of the project - also used to support discussions and decision-making with funders, communities and other stakeholders
- Helps research/project team respond to changes - part of adaptive management
- Developing a ToC - requires discussion between research team and stakeholders of: the context, desired long-term change, anticipated sequence of events to result in desired long-term change, assumptions of how these changes might happen - includes key questions that should be considered when analysing all of the previous
- Article emphasise the importance of dialogue with stakeholders, acknowledging power relations and the context
- Article presents reasons why researchers should consider working with ToC and why this tool is relevant to research projects e.g. Theory of change is particularly useful for international development research projects that combine research generation with stakeholder engagement and research-into-use activities
- Article presents a brief history of ToC
- Presents a useful table of the overview of ToC structured process, with key questions as a guide
- Lays out practical approaches to developing a ToC - process, time needed, enabling factors
- Discusses what makes a rigorous ToC - analysis of context; specificity and realism in defining impact; making assumptions explicit; using, reviewing and revising ToC
- Lists a number of ToC resources including: useful books and online resources on the methodological and practical issues, and designing a ToC. Includes table of Examples of types of short to medium term changes that research can influence

[Douthwaite, B., and Hoeffecker, E. \(2017\). Towards a complexity-aware theory of change for participatory research programs working within agricultural innovation systems. *Agricultural Systems*, 155: 88-102.](#)

Most agricultural research projects assume impacts result from adoption of research outputs, hampering ability to harness complexity. The paper develops a complexity-aware theory of change empirically. The model can increase our ability to plan and evaluate alternate pathways to impact. Similar purpose to above, as it provides an example of the application to a research context but with the aim of challenging the linear adoption pathway most research is assumed to follow.

de Buck, E., Hannes, K., Cargo, M., van Remoortel, H., Vande veegaete, A., Mosler, H.-J., Govender, T., Vandekerckhove, P., and Young, T. (2018). Engagement of stakeholders in the development of a Theory of Change for handwashing and sanitation behaviour change. *International Journal of Environmental Health Research*, 28(1): 8-22.

The article includes a short summary on Theory of Change concepts, such a causal pathways and assumptions (p.9). Notes how stakeholders can be involved in the Theory of Change process. The article makes note the iterative nature of Theory of Change, and uses the concept of changes in knowledge and skills influencing behavioural changes. Provide a real-world example of how they developed a Theory of Change in the WASH sector to promote handwashing and other sanitation practices in low- and middle-income countries to demonstrate the utility of a Theory of Change framework to inform decision-making and practice.

Janzen, R., Ochocka, J., and Stobbe, A. (2015). Towards a Theory of Change for community-based research projects. *Engaged Scholar Journal*, 2(2): 44-46.

The article includes a useful section on “Why a Theory of Change Could Be Helpful” (pp.45-46), noting strengths in ability to create a Theory of Change that is context-specific, aspirational, and iterative/evolving. Also describes how it is not just the findings and outputs that contribute to change, but also the research process. Notes additional value to theory of change approaches: building consensus and conceptual clarity; utility as a planning tool: “provide a comprehensive road map for implementation” (p.46); and utility as an evaluation tool.

van Es, M., Gujit, I., and Vogel, I. (2015). Hivos ToC Guidelines: Theory of Change Thinking in Practice: A stepwise approach.

This paper recognizes that a theory of change approach can be used for different purposes, by different users, and at different moments in the cycle of developing, monitoring, reviewing or evaluating a program or strategy. It provides comprehensive guidelines include concepts and definition (including utility), stepwise ToC development, and additional resources. This is an excellent comprehensive overview of the tool, includes concepts of spheres from outcome mapping.

Dhillon, L., and Vaca, S. (2018). Refining theories of change. *Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation*, 14(30): 64-87.

This paper: i) proposes the essential elements that contribute to robust Theories of Change and clarify the characteristics that distinguish these from other organizational tools and formats; ii) suggest additional elements for inclusion in the ToC (more meaningful causal strands, area of accountability, unintended or unexpected effects or results [p.9/13 of PDF]); iii) present graphic alternatives that allow for an evolution in representing their complexity and depth; and iv) provide ways to link ToCs to other organizational tools to increase organizational alignment, efficiency, and, most importantly, impact.

Mayne, J. (2015). Useful theory of change models. *The Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 2: 119–142.

This article describes three versions of a ToC including designing, presenting and simplifying the models. It concludes by summarising why the models presented are useful. The article uses an example to walk the reader through the elements of building a complex ToC. The article discusses the use of ToC in developing, managing, evaluating and scaling interventions (Mayne and Johnson 2015). Johnson, Guedenet and Saltzman (2014) provide examples of using ToC, particularly in planning and designing. Describes the difference between impact pathways, logic models and ToC - impact pathways describe causal pathways showing the linkages between the sequence of steps in getting from activities to impact. A theory of change adds to an impact pathway by describing the causal assumptions behind the links in the pathway—what has to happen for the causal linkages to be realized. Only when assumptions are added to the causal links does a logic model turn into a theory of change. Defines a number of key elements including beneficiaries (target groups), activities, goods and services, reach and reaction, capacity changes, behavioral changes, direct benefits, well-being changes, and highlights the fluidity of the definitions. Highlights different categories of assumptions - reach assumptions, capacity change assumptions, behavior change assumptions, direct benefits assumptions, well-being change assumptions.

- Two different types of capacity and behavioral changes
 - Incremental or additional changes to the current state e.g. learning new techniques and skills/adopting new practices
 - Fundamental changes, e.g. thinking about problems differently/changing current practices
- Need to distinguish the ex-ante from the ex post case
- Multifaceted Sufficient Interventions - many intervention need to engage a range of actors to make a difference and influence their behavior
- Presents methods for handling a ‘messy’ ToC e.g. nested ToC (developing a sub-ToC for each target group) and causal link analysis
- Suggests 3 versions of a ToC = narrative, overview ToC, and causal ToC
- Presents methods for simplifying the ToC e.g. dropping ‘boxes’ and including their essence in the causal link assumptions
- Presents a number of resources available for guidance in developing ToC
- Highlights the importance of testing the ToC through multiple versions against the logic and assumptions of improve its robustness - also testing the ToC against available evidence from previous research or evaluations

Valters, C. (2014). Theories of Change in International Development: Communication, Learning, or Accountability?. JRSP Paper 17. London, U.K.: Justice and Security Research Programme.

This paper argues that while a Theory of Change approach can create space for critical reflection; this requires a much broader commitment to learning from individuals, organisations, and the development sector itself. This paper discusses the tool in an international development context, but the lessons are

relevant for application in research contexts. Six key lessons are developed to support useful ToC practice:

- Theory of change approach can create space for critical reflection but there is a danger that this is an illusory process
- Personalities matter – they change whether a ToC is seen as a tool of communication, learning or a method of securing funding, or some combination of these
- Power relations between donors and implementers in the international development industry discourage critical reflection and therefore constrain Theory of Change approaches
- A Theory of Change approach needs to focus on process rather than product, uncertainty rather than results, iterative development of hypotheses rather than static theories, and learning rather than accountability
- Politically expedient Theories of Change may be useful, but are unlikely to encourage critical reflection
- If the aim is to encourage critical reflection and learning, the use of Theories of Change should be supported only so long as they remain useful in that respect

[Breuer, E., Lee, L., De Silva, M., and Lund, C. \(2016\). Using theory of change to design and evaluate public health interventions: A systematic review. *Implementation Science*, 11: 63-79.](#)

The article discusses theory-driven evaluation and its utility for the health sector, focusing on Theory of Change and how Theory of Change frameworks can be developed. Briefly notes that theories of change can include considerations of beneficiaries, actors in the context, and the sphere of influence, among others. The article discusses stakeholder involvement in Theory of Change development. Notes how Theory of Change development is method-neutral. The authors conduct a systematic review of public health interventions that used Theory of Change for evaluation. The article includes a checklist for reporting certain components of a Theory of Change (see Table 5, p.14).

[Temple, L., Barret, D., Blundo Canto, G., Dabat, M.-H., Devaux-Spatarakis, A., Faure, G., Hainzelin, E., Mathé, S., Toillier, A., and Triomphe, B. \(2018\). Assessing impacts of agricultural research for development: a systematic model focusing on outcomes. *Research Evaluation*, 27\(2\): 157-170.](#)

Shift of pressure for demand driven research reshape analytical frameworks that structure understanding of causal relationships between research activities, frameworks that structure the understanding of causal relationships between research activities, innovation processes and the consequences of both for development. Results demonstrate diversity of outcomes in human capital, social capital and knowledge infrastructure. Impact pathways concepts need to be improved to consider complex interactions among diverse actors. This paper provides a good overview of impact pathways as concept and that there are multiple pathways to impact (corroborates our preliminary findings).

Loiseau, B. Benedict, D., Sibbald, R., Raman, S. A., Loh, L. C., and Dimaras, H. (2016). How can a Theory of Change framework be applied to short-term international volunteering?. *International Health*, 8: 310-312.

Short piece proposing utility of Theory of Change in international volunteering contexts for better strategic planning and programme evaluation of volunteers' contributions to the communities they serve. Presents an example model for a short-term volunteer programme based in Dominican Republic that identifies the problem, community assets/needs, desired outputs (which are actually framed as what we call 'outcomes'), influential factors, assumptions, and strategies (which will be the 'activities' they undertake in the programme); the written-up content on these components is better explained than in the figure. Most useful point made in the article pertains to the authors' claim that "TOCs best reflect the change process when employed together with social science theory and research-based evidence, such that the messy complexities of real-world settings are accounted for" (p.310); while not explicit, also supports idea of assembling transdisciplinary teams and local partnerships for more effective Theory of Change development, and value of understanding the socio-ecological context in which a project or programme is situated. Shortcoming of the article is that they do not use language consistent with how we have, and they apply the concepts quite loosely – but it is a very easy and simple read.

Taplin, D. H., Clark, H., Collins, E., and Colby, D. (2013). A Series of Papers to Support Development of Theories of Change Based on Practice in the Field. New York: ActKnowledge, Centre for Human Environments.

The article presents definitions of the main components within a ToC, the process of creating a ToC, ToC use within M&E, different purposes of using a ToC, and assessing the quality of a ToC.

- Defines ToC as a method of demonstrating initiative and program logic through the characterization of long-term goals and then mapping backward to identify the changes that need to happen earlier (preconditions)
- Identifies ToC as a working model to test hypotheses and assumptions, and is both a process and a product that can be used for planning and evaluation
- Creates a snapshot of creating a ToC including describing outcomes pathway, the importance of identifying a workable long-term goal and outcomes, and moving backwards to identify the preconditions
- Defines the basic components of a ToC including outcomes, impact, indicators, interventions (activities) and assumptions
- Outlines reasons for developing ToC's, its different purposes and audiences, and the importance of matching the scope with its purpose
- Highlights the concept of boundary partners and the effectiveness of ToC's in modelling expected or desired impacts on the behaviours of actors in the environment who need to be influenced favourably if the project is to be sustained
- How to create a 'quality' ToC - assessing the plausibility, feasibility and testability, and the models usability within the organization
- Process of linking ToC with M&E (desired vs. actual outcomes and identifying indicators)

Maini, R., Mounier-Jack, S. and Borghi J. (2018). How to and how not to develop a theory of change to evaluate a complex intervention: reflections on an experience in the Democratic Republic of Congo. *British Medical Journal of Global Health*, 3: e000617.

The article presents an example of creating a ToC within a workshop setting. This example will be used to inform the evaluation of an intervention aiming to improve health worker payment and motivation in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Describes the process of building a ToC in this context (stakeholder workshop), what worked well, what didn't, and lessons learned.

- Explains using a ToC to evaluate complex interventions (interventions that comprise multiple components acting both independently and in conjunction with one another.)
- Explains using a ToC to articulate change process within interventions and describe the sequence of events linking intervention activities to long-term outcomes. Making explicit the conditions and assumptions required to enable change and acknowledging the role of context in influencing the process
- Explains the difference between ToC and logic models- ToC include feedback loops, are non-linear. Logic models more rigid
- Highlights that a ToC is an ongoing and iterative process- important of modifying the ToC throughout the process to reflect diversions
- Explains the need to identify the long-term goal of the intervention and then 'backwards mapping' to work back through to the earliest changes that are needed to occur
- Explains the process that was used in this workshop to create the theory of change including identifying long-term outcome, preconditions or intermediate outcomes needed to achieve the final outcome, activities needed to move from one outcome to the next, assumptions, rationale for each link in the causal pathway and indicators
- Reflects what worked well (e.g. ToC brought stakeholders together and widened their perspectives on the different aspects of the intervention etc.) and what didn't (e.g. highlights the importance of leveraging points where intervention can bring about change etc.)
- Identifies lessons learnt: looking beyond individual sectors, identifying all key stakeholders from the outset, ensuring a similar understanding of ToC across all key stakeholders, prepare to manage stakeholder dynamics (mitigating power dynamics) etc.

Vogel, I. (2012). Review of the use of Theory of Change in international development: Review Report. UK Department of International Development.

Review presents the results from interviews with 40 staff from development organizations looking at the practical aspects of working with ToC in programmes focused on international development

- ToC both a process and product
- Quality of ToC rests on making the assumptions explicit and ensuring strategic thinking is realistic and transparent
- Time and resources to work effectively with a ToC should be seriously assessed
- ToC can create a strong organising framework to improve programme design, implementation, evaluation and learning

- Core concepts of ToC that are currently used: context, long-term change, process/sequence of change, assumptions
- Provides definitions of core concepts including context, actors, assumptions, sphere of influence, indicators etc.
- Presents range of terms and approaches in ToC thinking (table 2) and variations in ToC
- Suggestions of when and how to develop a ToC- integrating a ToC at the start of the program, outcome mapping etc.
- Presents practical suggestions of how to begin to develop a ToC model (p.23), including key questions
- Assessing the quality of a ToC- usefulness, ownership and clarity
- How to present a ToC in a diagram- practical suggestions and examples
- Using ToC for M&E and impact assessment- embedding ToC thinking as a support to learning through the project cycle
- Presents similar resources as those found in Vogel, I. ESPA guide to working with Theory of Change for research projects

Ellis, J., Parkinson, D., and Wadia, A. (2011). Making connections: Using a theory of change to develop planning and evaluation. Charities Evaluation Services.

The article provides an overview of a Theory of Change approach, with a step-by-step guide for Theory of Change development using a fictional example (promotes the ‘working backwards’ approach) and highlights important components needed to make the framework ‘most useful’ (assumptions, resources, collaboration/partnerships, and timelines). The article includes discussion on the utility of the framework for evaluation. Uses similar (but not exact) definitions for Theory of Change terminology. Notes that a Theory of Change should be credible (based on previous experience or research), achievable (feasibility based on resources), testable (identification of indicators), and supported (stakeholder buy-in). Interestingly, the indicators are broken down into several types for monitoring and evaluation: output indicators, process indicators, and outcome indicators.

James, C. (2011). Theory of Change Review: A report commissioned by Comic Relief.

The executive summary provides a brief review of origins of Theory of Change, which actors typically use Theory of Change, benefits of Theory of Change (achieving collective understanding; monitoring, evaluation, and learning; identification of strategic partnerships; organizational alignment of projects/programmes; communications and reporting; and supporting involving and engagement processes), challenges in its application, and outlines some conceptual differences apparent in the literature on Theory of Change. The report includes a short list of useful guiding questions for Theory of Change development (p.5). All of these elements are further expanded in greater depth within the main review with examples and reflects how Comic Relief as an organization views, uses, and benefits from Theory of Change. Reflections on Comic Relief’s experiences with Theory of Change and recommendations are also included.

Thornton, P. K., Schuetz, T., Förch, W., Cramer, L., Abreu, D., Vermeulen, S., and Campbell, B., M. (2017). Responding to global change: A theory of change approach to making agricultural research for development outcome-based. *Agricultural Systems*, 152: 145-153.

Article describes a theory of change approach to a research for development program, building on how engagement and learning can enable change. Approach has implications for assessing outcomes and impacts and can augment potential to better link knowledge generation and development outcomes. This paper provides examples of the application of theory of change to the research context.