

Challenge 1: Managing time while dealing with differing perspectives

- Alternate formal and informal interaction formats (e.g. group workshops with bilateral coffee breaks)
- Explore differing assumptions of team members through scenarios and discuss their consequences for your overall vision and specific research activities, instead of forcing a consensus



Let's do integrated research!

Challenges and strategies for leading a 'Theory of Change' (ToC) process with interdisciplinary teams



Challenge 5: Fulfilling both service and science roles of ITD

- Plan how to collect, systematize and make use of assumptions from the very beginning
- Go beyond facilitation: perform an integrative science role by digging into the different knowledge fields involved, and identify inter-linkages and synergies between them

Challenge 2: Balancing between concrete and abstract discussions

- Use actor's analysis (e.g. movers, floaters, blockers) to arrive at people-oriented statements
- Apply guiding questions to ground the discussions and elicit concrete answers
- Include and give voice to junior researchers with good contextual knowledge



Challenge 4: Obtaining buy-in and overcoming reservations

- Explain the purpose of ToC both at the beginning and throughout the process
- Rename the tool if causing too much confusion
- Choose a good intervention mix, being synergistic with on-going activities and include both low and high-hanging fruits



Challenge 3: Ensuring rich discussions while balancing comfort and discomfort

- Break up understimulating comfort zones and arrange new and diverse working group compositions
- Prevent counterproductive discomfort zones by treating each perspective with genuine curiosity
- Take time to reflect individually, then start with group brainstorming and jointly formulate milestones on sticky-notes instead of formulating them individually

What is Theory of Change?

Theory of Change (ToC) can be a helpful tool for inter- and transdisciplinary (ITD) teams in sustainability research. It is a mapping of steps towards a desired long-term goal combined with a reflection on how and why change is expected to happen in a particular context. While a ToC development process has proved beneficial for various purposes (e.g. visioning, planning, learning), it also entails significant challenges. The challenges and strategies, displayed above, present lessons learned from developing ToCs in an interdisciplinary research team working on urban water management. Although derived from this specific context, they can support other programs working in different areas in their ITD endeavors.



Find more information

Deutsch L., Belcher B., Claus R., Hoffmann S. 2021: *Leading inter- and transdisciplinary research: Lessons from applying theories of change to a strategic research program*. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 120: 29-41 (Open Access)

