



Theory of Change

Defining Theory of Change (TOC)

'Theories of change' in general refer to the ideas, beliefs and hypotheses that people have about how and why change takes place. These theories of change may be conscious or unconscious, but – either way – they are underpinned by our personal beliefs, values, history, context, and culture.

“There can be no good theory of change, without a theory of how change happens.”

When looking to define theory of change from the perspective of those working in the social development sector, ToC is often described as the connection between activities and outcomes, with the articulation of this connection the key component of the ToC. The ability to articulate this connection rests on the idea that social programmes are based on explicit or implicit theories about how and why a programme will work. Therefore, articulating a ToC involves exploring and articulating a set of beliefs or assumptions about how and why change will occur in relation to a specific thematic area.

Therefore, we suggest that a ToC describes a process of planned social change, including the assumptions that guide process design as well as the long-term goals that the process seeks to achieve.

In short, a theory of change is...

- An organisation's story of *how* it will make change happen, together with
- An explanation of *why* this change should occur

Theory of change (ToC) can be viewed in three ways. These are outlined below:

- As an *approach* or way of thinking, ToC helps us to navigate and think about the complexity of all social change. In addition, it offers us a way of looking at our world (and our actions in that world) that encourages critical thinking, questioning and reflection.
- ToC can also be viewed as a *process* that takes place during the initial design or planning phase of a programme or project. However, if utilised optimally, this process will not take place only once. Instead, it will be utilised throughout the programme cycle as a means of facilitating an action-learning approach.
- Lastly, it can be viewed as a *product*, in that the TOC process results in a specific output, which may be in narrative or visual form, or a combination of both. This product will serve as the representation of the theory of change of an organisation, a team, a programme or a project. Key to thinking about ToC as a product is the notion that this product is a living thing; that is, it should never be considered complete or finalised. Rather, the ToC product

offers a framework that may be revisited and adapted over time as implementation, reflection and learning takes place.

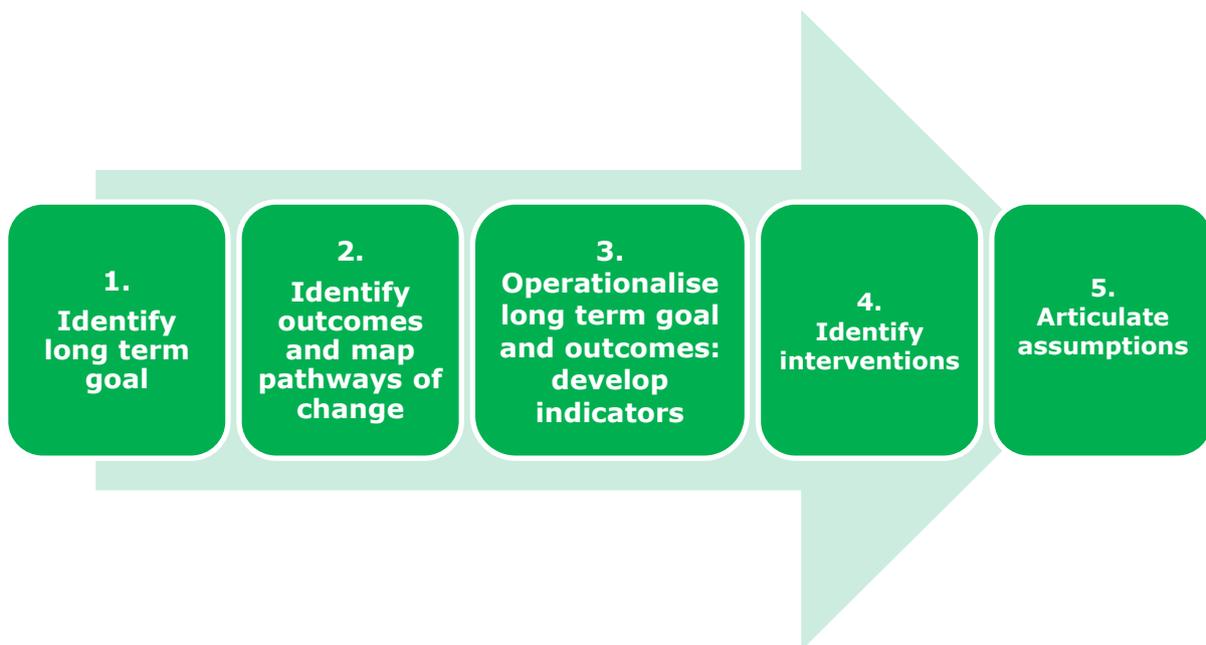
Purpose and benefits of theory of change

ToC has a number of inter-related purposes, such as:

- Programme planning, design and strategy(s)
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Communication
- Learning

Steps in developing a theory of change

We propose that there are five key steps in the development of a theory of change. These are outlined in the diagram below. However there is no one process to follow. Some people prefer to start with problem analysis while others prefer to start with visioning. An important part of the process would be to involve key stakeholders in crucial steps, making it a participatory exercise. Indeed, one of the key benefits of doing a theory of change in a participatory way is for the stakeholders to check their different assumptions about how change happens.



Southern Hemisphere can assist you by

- developing a theory of change in a participatory way through inhouse workshop training and facilitation
- conduct the background research to support your theories and conduct your theory-based evaluation

Resources from Tracey

Training calendar