

Theory of change: A tool for more effective change making

by Fran Demetriou

Theory of change is a great resource to support the effectiveness of social justice interventions, yet organisations encounter barriers to utilising this valuable tool.

In our theory of change series, we work on addressing these barriers by providing easy-to-understand, digestible information and direction to suggested resources. Our first article in the series looks at the barriers of awareness, knowledge and perception, and aims to help readers better understand theory of change's relevance to and benefits for their work.

Theory of change series

Theory of change has been around for many years, and is being used across the not-for-profit, NGO and public sectors. The use of theory of change continues to grow.

We have seen trends towards more funders requesting it as part of accountability measures, as well as more organisations implementing it to enhance program design, planning and evaluation. Yet we have also encountered challenges and barriers to organisations utilising this resource.

Some of these barriers include a lack of:

- Awareness of theory of change.
- Knowledge about what theory of change is and how it can be used.
- Perception and understanding of the relevance and benefits of theory of change.
- Internal capacity to navigate through the vast array of information available.
- Internal capability and/or capacity to undertake a theory of change process.
- Affordability of external consultants.

The aims of this series are to address each of these challenges in easy-to-understand, digestible articles with links to suggested resources. We hope this will help you better

understand theory of change and how to use it in your work.

Introduction

Our first article provides an introduction to the concept of theory of change and its relevance to and benefits for various types of social justice interventions.

Social justice interventions, by definition, all respond to a social need or problem and *do* something with the intention of *positively impacting* the situation. This might be preventing something from happening or making something happen. Broadly, these interventions include programs, policies, strategies, initiatives and projects.

TABLE 1: EXAMPLES OF INTERVENTIONS

Intervention	Intended impact
A youth employment program offers peer mentoring	Reduce youth unemployment
Parental leave policies for both women and men	Improve gender equality
A community education project on climate change	Reduce greenhouse emissions
A national mental health strategy involving consumer participation in service development	Improve the lives of people with a mental illness

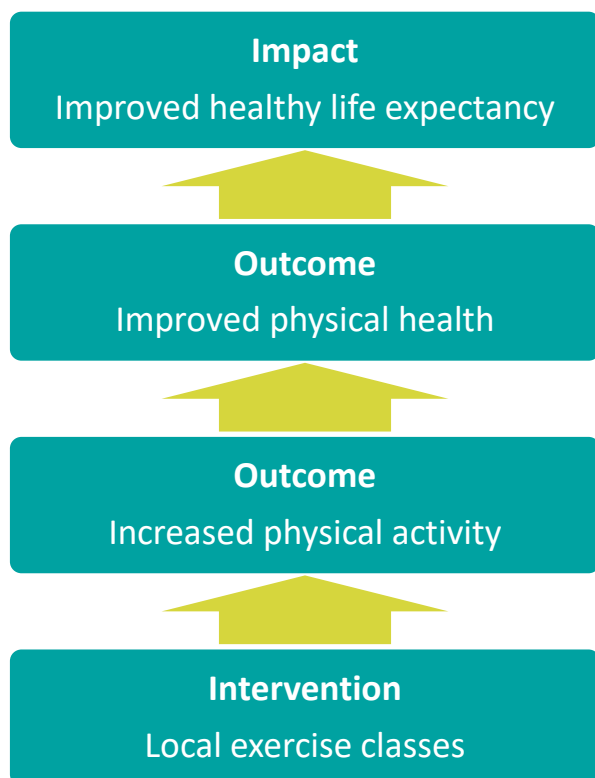
But how will these interventions lead to the impact specified? And what is this based on? This underlying logic behind why we believe an intervention will lead to change is a combination of existing evidence and our untested assumptions, and is what is called a *theory of change*.

So, what is theory of change?

A theory of change links the intervention and the intended impact, through a causal pathway of intermediary outcomes, and details the assumptions that sit behind this pathway.

It is usually (though not always) presented graphically, using a series of boxes and arrows to show the pathway between the intervention(s), intermediary outcomes and impact, with an explanatory narrative alongside it.

FIGURE 1: SIMPLE EXAMPLE OF A THEORY OF CHANGE



This simplistic example shows how local exercise classes could contribute to the impact of improving healthy life expectancy, by increasing physical activity which leads to improved physical health, which is a pre-condition for an improvement in healthy life expectancy.

We can test how well this theory reflects the real-world effects of exercise classes by collecting and analysing data, as part of monitoring and evaluation processes.

There is more to theory of change than just some boxes with outcomes in them though. A theory of change will usually include the following components (graphically or in narrative, or a combination of both):

- **Need/problem:** A description of the social need or problem that the intervention is intended to address, its causes and consequences.
- **Impact:** The ultimate change the intervention contributes to, which is usually long-term.
- **Outcomes:** The effects that result from the intervention that lead to the impact. These are pre-conditions for the ultimate change to occur.
- **Intervention(s):** The programs, policies, strategies, initiatives and projects undertaken.
- **Evidence and assumptions:** The specific research/evidence and untested assumptions that underpin the connections between the intervention(s), outcomes and impact.
- **Contextual factors:** A specific kind of assumption about the conditions in the intervention's operating environment which have an important influence on outcomes. These are usually separated into *resources/inputs* such as people, funding, partnerships, infrastructure; and *external factors* such as the social-economic context, political context, service system.

Here are a few links to real examples of theory of change from the web.

- A youth employment project:
knowhownonprofit.org/organisation/impact/plan-your-impact-and-evaluation/identify-the-difference-you-want-to-make-1/example-theories-of-change
- A community entertainment project for the elderly:
theposhclub.co.uk/impact
- An education development program:
edukans.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/TOC-e1516973551964.png
- A community of practice:
www.bridge.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Bridge-communities.jpg

How can it be used?

There are two key intended uses of theory of change that drive program effectiveness.

Designing and planning an intervention

When developing a new response to a social need/problem, a theory of change process provides the structure to think about the context and causes of the issue, the needed long-term change, and the pre-conditions that need to be in place for that change to occur.

These pre-conditions (the outcomes) can then be matched to an organisation's available resources, values and capabilities to identify ways in which the organisation can best contribute to making the change happen.

It allows an organisation to see the big picture, and where their work will fit into other existing efforts (either in their organisation or within the area in which they operate) to avoid overlap and enable the most efficient use of resources. It can help identify possible collaborators and partnership opportunities to strengthen existing work.

Theory of change supports good planning through presenting a clearer picture of what activities to prioritise at different stages. It can help to identify risk through identifying the external factors and internal inputs/resources that impact the ability of the intervention to work.

Monitoring and evaluating an intervention

Once an intervention is underway, it is important to assess whether the intervention is actually leading to the intended outcomes and whether the assumptions of how the intervention works hold true, to support the continuous improvement of the intervention and to be accountable to key stakeholders.

Theory of change provides the foundation to monitor and evaluate interventions. Once the chain of outcomes has been laid out, we can develop performance indicators to measure these. By setting out assumptions, these can be tested.

Building a theory of change is therefore often a critical step in developing a monitoring and evaluation framework for an intervention. In turn, as we implement our monitoring and evaluation processes, we are able to test and refine our theory of change, and the intervention(s) to which it relates.

What are the benefits of having a theory of change?

Well designed and utilised theory of change can lead to interventions being more effective at delivering their intended results. There are also other benefits to undertaking a theory of change process, and these include:

- **Better team cohesiveness and engagement:** Going through the theory of change process helps staff and volunteers understand how their work contributes to the bigger picture. It can create a sense of shared understanding and alignment in direction. It can also help

surface any differences in understanding of how the intervention works and enable a space to clarify and refine this across the team.

- **Generating support:** Having a clearly articulated model for achieving change helps potential donors and funding bodies understand why they should contribute to your work. It's a powerful way to communicate your work.
- **Being transparent and accountable:** Being transparent about the basis of your work and the outcomes it's intended to produce means you can be accountable to intended beneficiaries, supporters, and other stakeholders invested in your work. It's good governance!

- Website – Learning for Action learningforaction.com/what-is-a-theory-of-change
- Blog post by Will Allen at Learning for Sustainability: “Using a theory of change (TOC) to better understand your program” learningforsustainability.net/post/theory-of-change
- Blog post by Ann-Murray Brown: “What is this thing called Theory of Change” www.annmurraybrown.com/single-post/2016/03/09/What-is-this-thing-called-Theory-of-Change
- Guide by Angela Kail and Tris Lumley at New Philanthropy Capital: *Theory of Change: The beginning of making a difference* www.thinknpc.org/publications/theory-of-change

Want more?

Grappling with theory of change can leave your head swimming after the first read and it's often useful to read a few different introductions until it starts to make sense. There are a broad range of resources available for different audiences and suited to different uses, which can make it difficult to know where to begin. Here is a short list of free introductory materials explaining what theory of change is and why it's important to have one:

- Website – Center for Theory of Change www.theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change

Assistance with theory of change

Lirata Consulting assists funders, service providers and advocacy organisations to develop theories of change and other forms of program logic, and to undertake effective monitoring and evaluation.

For further information or assistance, please contact the Lirata team:

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