A Quick Guide to Theory of Change
Prepared for NIDOS by Ian Gray
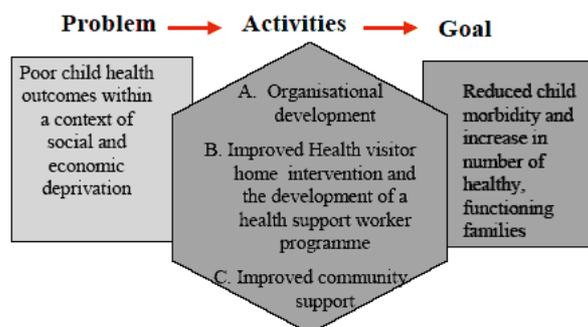## April 2017

What is a Theory of Change?

There is no agreed definition on what a Theory of Change is. Theories of Change are essentially about how we think that change happens. It is nearly always a mix of evidence and assumptions. If a project involves people, then it will inevitably mean theories about power transference, behavioural economics and norms, etc. We often carry these theories around implicitly in our head, no longer questioning causalities that may or may not actually hold up. Most people point back to Carol Weiss as being the person who formulated the concept of ToCs for this sector.[i] Weiss described a Theory of Change as "a theory of how and why an initiative works."[ii]

Valters states that 'for some Theory of Change is a precise planning tool, most likely an extension of the 'assumptions' box in a logframe; for others it may be a less formal, often implicit 'way of thinking' about how a project is expected to work; or beyond this, an approach aiming to encourage a politically informed, reflexive and complex approach to development.'[iii] Vogel adds that "a Theory of change draws its methodological credentials from a long-standing area of evaluation which deals with programme theories. It is also informed by an equally long-standing development practice - reflective practice for empowerment and social change." She goes on to state that "some people view it as a tool and methodology to map out the logical sequence of an initiative from inputs to outcomes. Other people see it as a deeper reflective process and dialogue amongst colleagues and stakeholders, reflecting on the values, worldviews and philosophies of change that make more explicit people's underlying assumptions of how and why change might happen as an outcome of the initiative. Theory of change is at its best when it combines both approaches. The mapping of the logical sequence is strengthened by critical thinking about the contextual conditions that influence the programme, the motivations and contributions of stakeholders and other actors, and the different interpretations (assumptions) about how and why that sequence of change might come about."[iv]
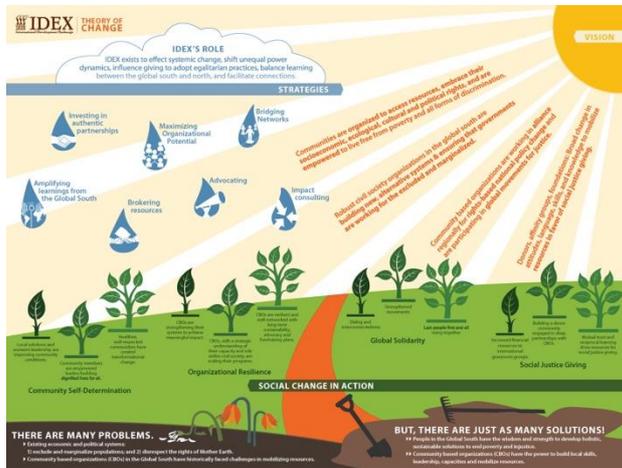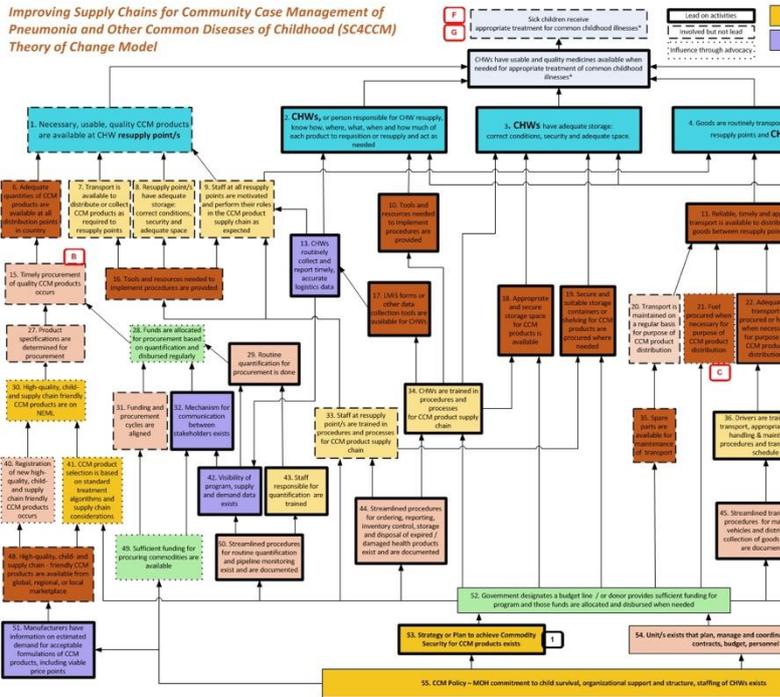
Types of Theory of Change

Theories of change can be very simple, such as the one produced by the Scottish Government funded 'Starting Well' Project (right).

Or they can be quite detailed systems diagrams, such as the SC4CCM theory of change model below.

Improving Supply Chains for Community Case Management of Pneumonia and Other Common Diseases of Childhood (SC4CCM) Theory of Change Model

Others are more artistic and descriptive of their various elements, rather than a rigorous 'logic model.' The IDEX theory of change example (left).

Using logic within a model is the most useful in terms of conveying how you believe change will happen. The Aspen and ACTknowledge theory of change model is a good example of this approach.

This model (right) outlines a long-term outcome or goal that an initiative is seeking to contribute to. Each octagon shape underneath it is a 'precondition' for that goal to be reached. For each precondition, there are further preconditions underneath that need to be in place to enable it.

A useful worked example can be found on the theory of change.org website.[v] The model should have all the main preconditions that are necessary for the goal to be reached.
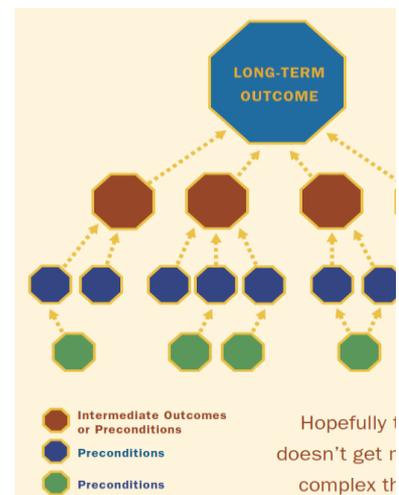
How do I develop a Theory of Change? Best Practices and Core Components

- Try to involve all the key stakeholders in a project or initiative as a facilitated group exercise. This should take at least half a day, but setting aside a whole day is useful.
- Ensure that you have a strong context analysis and assessment to inform your workshop attendees. It can be useful to start with a problem tree to analyse the issues that you are seeking to address.
- Identify the end goal
- Build out the preconditions underneath this goal.
- Develop the intervention logic. You will probably find that it takes a few iterations to agree on the logic running through all the preconditions.
- Ensure time to articulate assumptions and assess whether they 'hold' as a group.
- Understand the contributions of other stakeholders. It will be rare that a Theory of Change will be within the scope of one organisation to 'deliver.' Identify which other stakeholders contribute to each precondition and which preconditions are beyond the scope of your organisation. Preconditions that you will work on directly are called your 'contribution path.'
- Agree what the indicators are required to show that a precondition is in place.
- Reflect, have you covered everything?
- Agree how it will be written up and used. All Theory of Change diagrams should be accompanied with a text to guide the reader through the diagram.
- Agree when and how you will review the Theory of Change

How does Theory of Change fit with other development and advocacy tools?
There are a number of tools that are often used in the assessment, design, monitoring and evaluation process for development, humanitarian and advocacy projects. Using a Theory of Change is best used during the design process, when you have carried out your research, assessment and analysis at the start of your design process. If you are using a logframe, the development of a Theory of Change should occur before you develop your logframe, as your logframe should be based upon it.

Julian Barr from ITAD states that "The theory of change explains how you see the world, and how change happens and how you are going to intervene based on that understanding. The Logframe then becomes a management and measurement tool for making resourcing decisions. It is good for defining success, but not for defining reality."[vi]

Next Stage Theory of Change – Introducing TOCAM:P (Theory of Change for Adaptive Management: Programming)

Some donors are adopting new ways of using Theories of Change. The Humanitarian Innovation Fund has started using the Theory of Change Adaptive Management tool with its grantees on its 'Accelerating the Journey to Scale' programme.[vii] This tool integrates Theory of Change and Adaptive management approaches to enable more context appropriate and adaptive projects.[viii]

Further Reading and Resources

Anderson, A. (2009) The Community Builders Guide to Theory of Change
http://www.dochas.ie/Shared/Files/4/TOC_fac_guide.pdf

Stein, D., and Valters, C. (2012) Understanding Theory of Change in International Deveopment http://www.theoryofchange.org/wp-content/uploads/toco_library/pdf/UNDERSTANDINGTHEORYOFChangeSteinValtersPN.pdf

Taplin, D., and Rasic, M. (2012) Source book for facilitators leading theory of change development sessions
http://www.betterevaluation.org/en/resources/guide/facilitators_sourcebook_theory_of_change

Valters, C. (2014) Theories of Change in International Development: Communication, Learning, or Accountability?
http://www.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/JSRP/downloads/JSRP17.Valters.pdf

Vogel, I. (2012) Review of the use of 'Theory of Change' in international development
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08a5ded915d3cfd00071a/DFID_ToC_Review_VogelV7.pdf

[i] See http://www.theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/toc-background/toc-origins/

[ii] See http://www.theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/toc-background/toc-origins/

[iii] See Valters (2014)

[iv] See Vogel (2012)

[v] See Superwoman example and guidance on this model of Theory of Change
https://www.theoryofchange.org/pdf/Superwomen_Example.pdf

[vi] See Vogel (2012)

[vii] http://www.elrha.org/hif/funding/journeytoscale/

[viii] For More information on TOCAM contact ian@graydotcatalyst.com