

Theory of Change for Organisations



Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| 1 Executive summary | 3 |
| 2 Method and approach | 3 |
| 3 Key findings & analysis from key lines of enquiry | 3 |
| 3.1 What value can an organisational theory of change add? | 4 |
| 3.2 How can an organisational theory of change inform and be embedded within the organisation's strategy?..... | 5 |
| 3.3 Key process guidelines for organisations developing a theory of change..... | 9 |
| 4 Conclusions & recommendations | 17 |
| 5 Appendices | 18 |
| Interviewees..... | 18 |
| Bibliography | 18 |

About Bond

Bond is the civil society network for global change. We bring people together to make the international development sector more effective. bond.org.uk

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1. Executive summary

The Theory of Change approach at organisational level facilitates an in-depth exploration of values, beliefs and worldviews on how change happens. Furthermore, it analyses stakeholders, systems and power to ascertain where the organisation can collaborate and partner to add the most value. Many organisations work across contexts with variable spheres of influence. The approach enables them to explore, research and evidence alongside listening to a wide range of perspectives to scrutinise how they can most effectively contribute towards change.

The analysis stemming from a theory of change approach informs evidence-based decisions for key interventions, models and approaches at organisational level that are hypothesised to be most effective. This 'organisational theory' will then be reflected and tested throughout the implementation of the strategy to ensure the underlying premise of the organisation is affirmed as well as to identify areas where it can be further adapted and strengthened.

Theory of Change at an organisational level should be considered as an **approach** that is usually accompanied with a theory of change **process** to guide organisations through how they perceive change happens and their role in supporting this change. Writing up the outcome of this approach and process forms the theory of change **output**. These three aspects of theory of change should be understood as many organisations focus on the output as the key deliverable but the richness is within the approach and process to enhance critical reflective thinking that challenges an organisation's values, beliefs and purpose.

Theory of Change adds the most value when it is not considered a discrete phase or project but is embedded within the organisation's culture and practice from inception, throughout implementation and informs strategic decisions. In addition, it offers a common narrative of coherence that reflects organisational values, models and approaches to achieving impact.

2. Method & approach

This learning paper builds on the collective experience of individuals from organisations that have undertaken an organisational theory of change as well as some that elected not to utilise a theory of change approach in their organisational strategy. Interviewees included Donors, Researchers and Consultants who offered critical reflection and views on the added value and pitfalls of organisational theories of change with many of those interviewed having been involved in a significant number of organisational theories of change from small local partners to global head-quarters and member organisations. (See appendix A for a list of organisations and individuals).

A literature review was also conducted to explore current thinking and build on existing work that has been done. (See appendix B for bibliography)

3. Key findings & analysis

The key findings and analysis have been grouped under each line of enquiry that formed the research questions for this paper:

- **What value does an organisational theory of change add?**
- **How can an organisational theory of change inform and be embedded within the organisation's strategy?**
- **What key process guidelines should organisations be aware of when developing a theory of change**

3.1 What value can an organisational theory of change add?

There is strong consensus from those interviewed that the theory of change approach at organisational level can bring significant value when a strong critical reflection approach is adopted. In particular,

- 'the theory of change brought coherence across the organisation at how all our work contributes towards our organisational goal'
- 'the approach enabled us to critically reflect on our assumptions and challenge our ways of working'
- 'the process brought unity across thematic areas to understand their collective contribution towards their goal'

The most significant areas of added value are illustrated in the word cloud below which highlights that 'coherent' was the most repeated word when describing the added value. In particular, organisations noted that a '**coherent framework**' for articulating how all aspects of an organisation contribute towards **change** and how the approach **challenged** them to **reflect, explore** and **analyse** how they believe change happens. Exploring **evidence** and **assumptions** to support this hypothesis further challenged their underlying organisational narrative and helped inform strategic choices for the organisation to ensure they could maximise their effectiveness.

Many organisations recognised the value the approach had brought and further highlighted this was maximised when their 'theory of change' was embedded in to both the culture and processes of an organisation. In particular, the organisational M&E/Impact framework can identify organisational research questions for assessing selected areas of change and critical assumptions from the theory of change. One global organisation stated that 'it focussed all aspects of the organisation around agreed impact areas, enabling resources to be focussed and channelled in to agreed impact areas for a common narrative connected to the organisation's mission and brand.

The value was highlighted both internally and externally. Many organisations felt that theory of change brought a level of synergy across departments and a link to the end impact the organisation is seeking to achieve. Internally, the depth of critiquing and exploring evidence on why certain models and approaches are proposed led to critiquing and evaluating the core role and heart of the organisation in refreshing and challenging ways.

Key words describing added value of organisational theories of change



A theory of change approach is based on a **participatory model** and requires consultation from across the organisation with strong representative voice from partners and those it claims to benefit and exist for. The approach and the resulting articulation are only as valuable and legitimate as the input received. Organisation's experience and recommendations for stakeholder consultation are explored further in section 3.3 below.

While an organisational theory of change can add substantial value, several challenges were also noted. These include:

- Not linking effectively with strategy, resulting in two separate processes that do not fully relate to each other
- Organisations not allowing enough time for effective reflection and participation
- The theory of change is across so many contexts it can become very generalised if it is not developed and facilitated well
- Different understanding by organisations of what a theory of change is

These challenges can be mitigated by following the steps outlined in section 3.3.

3.2 How can an organisational theory of change inform and be embedded within the organisation's strategy?

Key differences between a theory of change and strategy process

A participatory, visionary and well-developed strategy process has significant overlap with a theory of change process. However, a lot of strategy guidance provided and followed by the not-for-profit sector illustrates some core differences in process and principles.

Many strategies are developed by senior management and focus on what the organisation wants to achieve without conceptualising the complex change process for the end user as well as how to partner, empower and leverage others to maximise impact. Those interviewed combined with a desk review of strategy guidance for not-for-profits highlighted the following divergence **can exist** between the two processes.

Differences noted between typical strategy and theory of change process at an organisational level

| | Typical strategy process | Theory of Change process |
|--|---|--|
| Context analysis & starting point | A strategy includes an external context analysis | Theory of Change will also start with analysing context but through the lens of what will change for end users (ideally from their perspective). This is a significant stage in a theory of change process before embarking on where the organisation's efforts can contribute. The external context analysis considers stakeholders, environment, power, gender and systems in relation to the Vision of Success. |
| Participation and 'top-down' versus 'bottom-up' | Strategies are often developed by senior management through a 'top-down' approach with a varying level of participation and consultation. | As theory of change is focussing on real change in people's lives, the approach and process should build from the 'bottom-up'. Theory of Change process is highly participatory and must be grounded in local realities through understanding end users, partners and stakeholder perspectives as well as building on existing evidence. There should be high participation from all parts of the organisation and through all levels of delivery – HQ-Partner-Members-Beneficiaries. This is further explored in Section x below |
| Stakeholder mapping | Stakeholder mapping is done in a strategy process to help understand the external environment | Stakeholder mapping is also conducted but further explored through analysing their relative power and agency in relation to the vision of success. |

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| | – competitors, market gaps, partners etc. | Organisations then reflect who they can: partner with; influence; support or don't work with to ensure their organisation positions itself within a complex change process, recognising its own value can be significantly increased when working collaboratively with others. |
| Assumptions & evidence | A typical strategy process rarely systematically unpacks the link between different high-level changes, the assumptions being made and evidence to support them | A theory of change process considers what assumptions an organisation is making when reflecting how change happens and what research and evidence exists to support this. This enables an organisation to critique its worldview and consider what basis is it using for assuming its interventions will contribute towards change. This stage in the process enables a deep-dive reflection and challenge. |
| Linearity | Strategy may link interventions to the goal in a linear or non-linear way | Non-linear – recognises the complexity of change |
| Testing, learning and adaptive management | Strategies may have a mid-term review or refresh during implementation. Strategies general focus on extent to which plans, and targets have been achieved | Theories of Change should build in reflection points and organisational research areas based on the theory of change. These reviews should enable an organisation to learn and adapt throughout implementation and complement adaptive management practice. Theories of Change focus on contribution towards planned changes for target groups. |

In an organisational theory of change approach, after reflecting how change happens for the end users through an organisation-neutral standpoint, the process leads you to reflect and critique a systems and power analysis on how this change can most effectively be achieved, recognising the complexity of the operating environments and the multitude of enablers and barriers. The organisation then considers its strategic assets, its distinctiveness and where it can add most value through partnering and enabling others. This high-level conceptual worldview of how change happens is further critiqued through

exploring what evidence exists that this is how change happens and what assumptions are being made that need to hold true for this theory to be valid.

A reflective and participatory strategy process would have many stages overlapping with theory of change and therefore if the two processes are run in parallel or succession, the scope of each should be ascertained. The theory of change approach can be used to inform the entire strategy but would require clear scoping, parameters and non-negotiables at agreed touch points to ensure organisational sign off and alignment.

The scope of an organisational theory of change – defining the non-negotiables

Commencing an organisational theory of change approach prior to or during a strategy process can be very broad in scope if there are no set parameters to work within. Conversely, narrowing the scope can limit the reflective capacity and opportunity for improvements and innovation. ***The approach therefore needs to be very clear on how broad the scope can be and what are the non-negotiables*** for an organisation this can include: the typology of end users, location, key types of intervention (emergency response, service delivery, empowerment), types of organisational approaches (rights-based, advocacy etc.), organisational values and beliefs, operating model (direct delivery, partners, CBOs etc). funding model OR, an organisation can be fully open to using the theory of change approach and process to critiquing all these aspects and developing a new model for contributing towards change.

The importance here is **understanding the scope**. One method used for doing this is for the theory of change facilitator to develop 8-10 core organisational questions that can be put to the leadership team and other stakeholder groups to inform the theory of change process. A skilled facilitator and Theory of Change lead needs to understand the level of flexibility within these responses and the added value in exploring deeper.

Organisational theories of change – different levels

Organisations fundamentally hold different values, beliefs, operating models etc. but it is also important to recognise that an organisational theory of change approach and process looks different across organisations depending on their size and scope. One organisation interviewed operated in one country and was funded through the UK office, their organisational theory of change was comparable to another global organisation's country-level programme theory of change.

This distinction is important when developing the process as an organisation operating in 80 countries across varied contexts and thematic areas will have a theory of change at a higher conceptual level that reflects values, beliefs, researched models etc. rather than context specific interventions.

The diagram below from the HIVOS TOC guide (2015) illustrates the different levels of theory of change from a worldview through to organisational, thematic and project or programme. While many organisations have theories of change at different levels, the critical point is that they reinforce and link to each other.

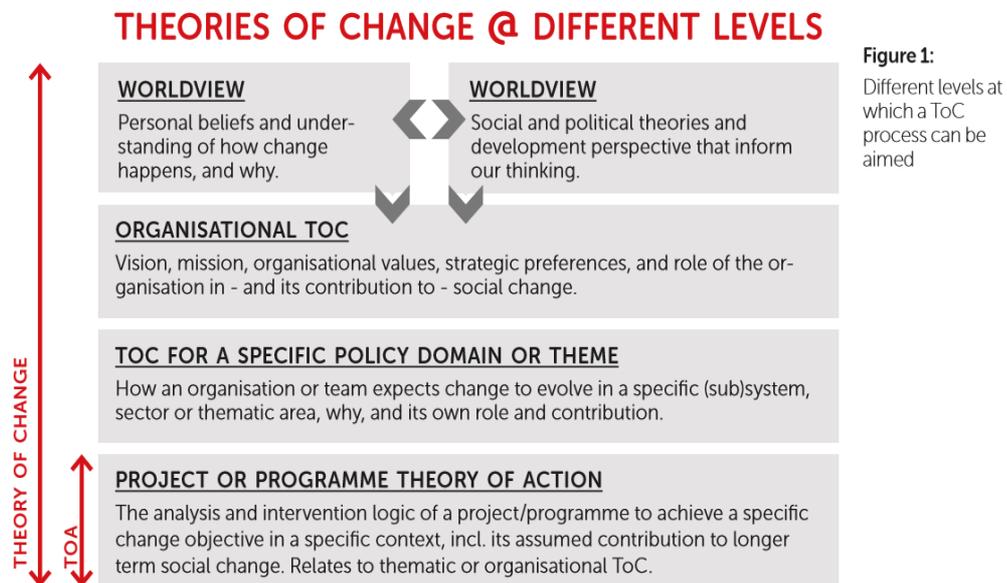


Figure 1:
Different levels at which a ToC process can be aimed

(Diagram from Marjan van Es, Gujit. I, Vogel. I, Hivos ToC Guidelines, Theory of Change Thinking in Practice, HIVOS, 2015)

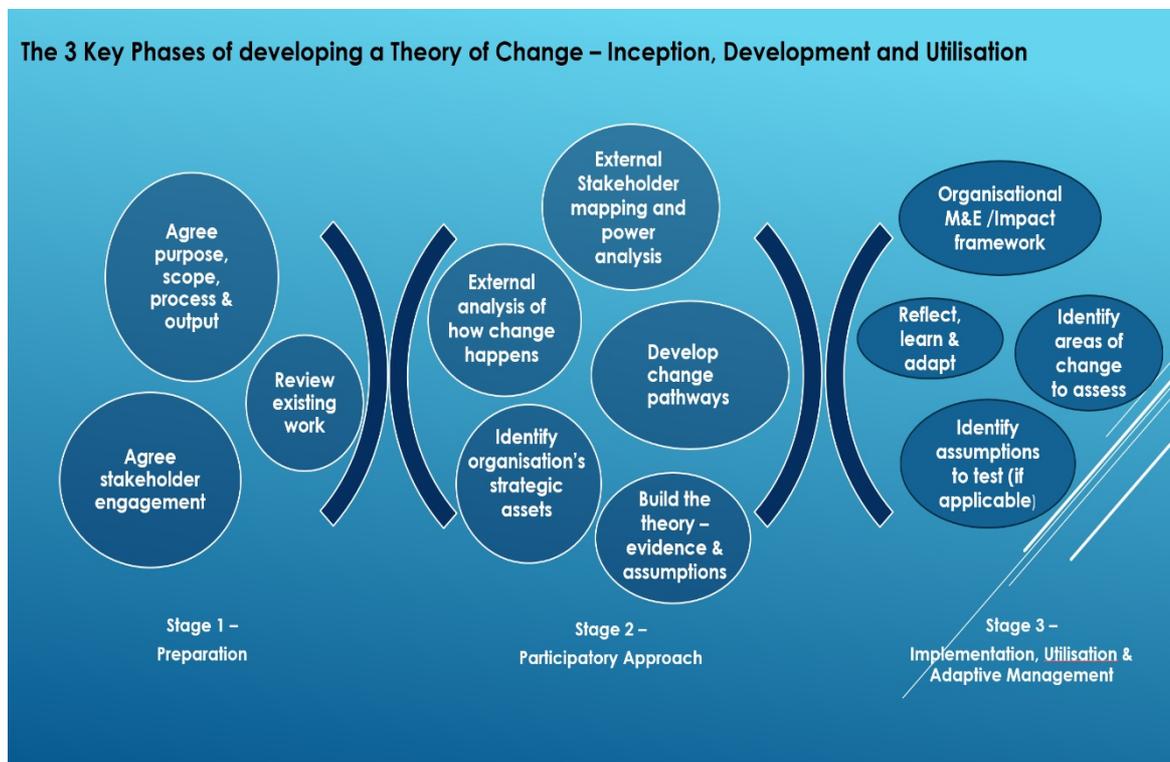
Timing

There is strong consensus that an organisational theory of change adds the most value when the process is undertaken prior to commencing a new organisational strategy. However, often the organisational theory of change is developed in tandem with the strategy due to time constraints and it is therefore critical that the two processes need to inform and reinforce each other. It is critical to allow sufficient time to develop, reflect, be participatory, evidence, utilise and adapt otherwise the value-add of the approach can be diluted.

Some organisations **retrospectively fit an organisational theory of change to their strategy**. In this instance, a strategy is already developed and to some degree there will be an inherent theory of change, an organisation then decides to formally develop a theory of change and this can be used to **operationalise the strategy and develop the strategic plan**. As above, the scope needs to be clearly agreed, can the theory of change approach be fully utilised which largely depends on whether the organisation has flexibility to adapt? What are the non-negotiables? If there is no flexibility then the theory of change can be developed to communicate how the organisation believes change happens and how it will contribute as well as be used to develop an M&E or Impact framework. If there is a level of flexibility the theory of change approach and process can be used to reflect whether the organisation is using its resources most effectively to contribute towards change and adapt accordingly.

3.3 Key process guidelines for organisations developing a theory of change

The following diagram outlines the phases: before (planning), during (participatory approach) and after (implementation, utilisation and adaptive management) in developing an organisational theory of change. Each phase within the diagram is explained in more detail in the subsequent narrative.



Phase 1 – preparation

Stakeholder engagement - a participatory approach

The ToC process **MUST** be highly participatory and ensure engagement and input from across the organisation, its partners and those the organisation is claiming to impact. There is no prescribed format for who and how stakeholders should be engaged but a mix of the following consultation processes are generally considered to be the most effective:

- Core team who define the purpose, scope, approach and review key milestones and deliverables
- Workshop to explore critical reflections in more depth and build the theory
- Wider consultative group who receive key outputs at various stages then review, input and give feedback
- Online workshops for participants who are not able to be part of face-to-face discussions (often overseas)
- Interviews with individuals or small groups who can give critical input

As well as determining the staged approach it is **critical** to ensure the right people are participating. The following stakeholder groups should all be considered for inclusion.

| Stakeholder group | Notes |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Cross-organisational representation | Ensure a range of stakeholders across functions are represented |
| Inclusion of senior management | Ensure buy-in and support from senior representatives |
| Strong partner engagement | If the organisation works through partners then their perspective is fundamental to understanding how change happens |
| End user/client engagement | The ultimate 'beneficiary' of the organisation should input in to how change happens. At an organisational level, this often happens through the organisation's partners |
| External stakeholders | Funders, peers, researchers and other actors can be either engaged in the process or part of the wider consultative group as above |

Agree purpose, scope, process & output

There are numerous primary drivers for developing an organisational ToC and this is the first step to clarify in determining the process. While not mutually exclusive, the main compelling reasons are:

- Informing an organisational strategy
- Operationalising a strategy
- Developing a coherent framework for how change happens
- External communication purposes
- Have a theory of change to develop an organisational M&E/Impact framework
- Developing a narrative for organisational understanding of values, beliefs and approaches to how change happens
- Donor/Funder demand driven

As above, the non-negotiables should be agreed to help focus but not overly narrow the scope.

Direct & indirect spheres of influence

A fundamental part of scoping a theory of change process is understanding what changes and stakeholders fall within a direct sphere versus an indirect sphere of influence for an organisation as this affects your intended level of contribution, who and how to partner as well as the scope of your 'theory'.

For example, an international NGO based in the UK may have a level of influence over its partners in terms of what and how it funds and supports them but the end users within the partner's programmes are in the indirect sphere of influence for the UK based international NGO if it does not work directly with the end users. Understanding the level you want to assess impact at and your level of influence over these changes helps in critical reflection for your theory of change.

Process - grounded in local context and reality

An organisational theory of change must be grounded in the change it is contributing towards for its end users and what changes (preconditions) the organisation can contribute towards to achieve this. The end users, together with those closest to them should be leading the visioning process of what change they want to see in their own lives, what does success look like rather than prescribed by an international organisation with the end user being a mere passive recipient of aid. However, for some global organisations working through in-country partners, their sphere of influence may stop at their in-country partners who then deliver programmes. Any vision of success would therefore be very high level and broad as it would be defined locally by the partners and their 'beneficiaries' on an individual project basis.

Depending on the size of the organisation, grounding in local realities and contexts can look quite different. An organisation working in a few contexts can use a highly participatory process but an organisation working in 80 countries will need strong input via its partners and utilise existing impact studies, evaluations, context analysis to understand how change happens and will be more conceptual and research based. There is strong consensus on the importance of alignment between levels of theories of change, organisational-thematic-programme-project but the order of construction depended on the nature of the organisation. However, as theories of change are not static, the importance is on participation, alignment and adaptive capacity to contexts. ***Therefore, organisational theories of change must reflect the local and external contexts as well as having reflection capacity to adapt to changing local realities.***

Outputs from a theory of change process

For many organisations, there are a range of outputs. A 'thought piece' on 'How change happens' that explores change for the target end 'beneficiary' can be written up in narrative form to inform the next stages of the theory of change approach. This often includes links to SDGs, current trends and external research. The learning review that consolidates existing learning can also be written up.

As organisations explore who they work with, their skills and capacities, this can also be written up to capture how the organisation seeks to differentiate itself, what strategic assets (skills/capacities) the organisation seeks to build on as well as existing and potential relationships with power holders the organisation can contribute towards and leverage. However, most organisations go through this thinking as part of the theory of change approach but there are rare examples of where this is written up and no examples from those quoted where this is externally shared.

The next stage of developing the theory of change and a combination of systems mapping, power analysis, impact mapping and understanding preconditions (changes) that need to happen for the Vision to be realised usually informs the final output. Most organisations consulted conducted this stage in a workshop setting where groups explored in depth how their organisation contributes towards short, medium and long-term changes that contribute towards the vision/goal.

The initial output of developing this mapping is normally quite messy which reflect the complex and non-linear way that change happens. Many aspects are interconnected and stakeholders explore what needs to change, type of change (policy, practice, knowledge, attitude etc.) and by whom. This exercise normally results in a number of iterations and further consultations and workshops to refine and

explore deeper. This detailed level of output which should also link to evidence and assumptions is the most useful for informing organisational M&E/Impact frameworks and showing organisational coherence and alignment towards a goal but less useful for external communication due to its high detail and complexity.

Many organisations then develop a succinct summary of the theory of change that can be used for communication and external audiences. This higher-level ToC should cross-reference to the detail without losing its substance but is tailored to a different audience. Possible outputs are summarised in the diagram below.



Review existing work

Most organisations have an inherent theory of change and can build on existing thinking and papers both internal and external that can inform the ToC. This can include:

- Strategy documents (Thematic, country programmes etc)
- Evaluations
- Context analysis
- Theories of change at other levels
- Learning reviews
- External research and sector best practice

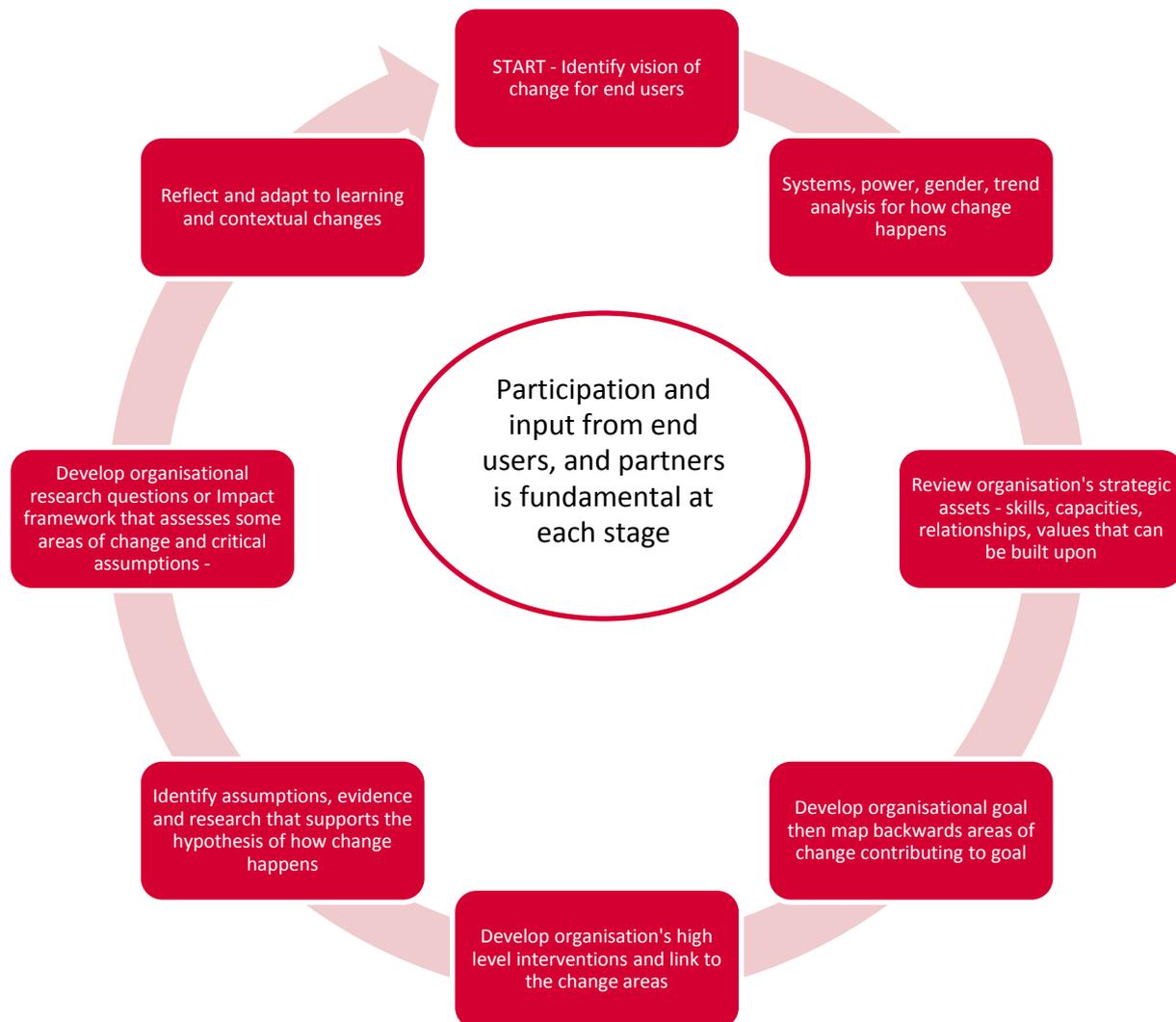
A review of existing papers, internal and external can be done prior to embarking on the theory of change process to inform current thinking. However, it should be noted that the first stage of the theory of change approach is to think of how change happens outside of your organisation and this learning review can inform that but must avoid restricting consultees and decision makers to existing ways of working.

If the organisation is purely driven by the final visual the essence of theory of change and the critical thinking can be lost. However, the final output, purpose and utilisation should be considered from the outset. The final **Output** should be considered in outline at the planning stage, how it links to the purpose and how it will be utilised going forward. The final output must remain flexible to what stems from the approach but an agreed outline level of detail will help inform the process. Some organisations prefer to not have an output and use the theory of change process purely as an approach and process to ask critical questions and deep reflection that informs other areas of work and outputs without producing an organisational theory of change document or visual.

Phase 2 – participatory process

The following steps provide an outline of stages that have been used by Consultants and organisations in the development stage of an organisational theory of change.

Theory of Change process for developing an organisational level



Phase 3 – implementation, utilisation & adaptive management

Ownership

The critical factors to ensure ownership are **strong participation** at all levels (horizontal and vertical structures) and from Boards and Senior Management to Partners and beneficiaries. Secondly, to optimise utilisation and ownership, a clear dissemination plan is needed to ensure people both understand and use it. This dissemination should also include opportunities for staff, partners, stakeholders to critique, give feedback and a clear understanding that it's a live document that will be updated to emerging evidence and contextual changes.

The research explored how well organisations felt they had achieved cross-organisational ownership and responses ranged from many employees not being aware that the theory of change existed to the theory of change being a fundamental part of the organisation.

How will the theory of change be utilised?

As stated above, the theory of change as an approach can be used to inform strategy or thinking in a number of areas. However, when the process is followed and a change map is created with assumptions, this can be used in a number of ways but some of the most common uses identified are:

- Developing an organisational Impact Assessment Framework that identifies areas of change to assess from the theory of change
- Identify organisational research questions that test selected assumptions during strategy implementation
- Identify critical reflection moments to review if the theory is holding true and how the organisation can adapt to strengthen its impact
- Utilise for communication purposes to supporters and donors
- Develop thematic or country programme level theories of change that align and re-inform the organisational theory of change

Monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment – link to theory of change at organisational level

The organisational theory of change can be used to identify areas or dimensions of change to monitor and evaluate to assess if the expected impact is occurring. Causal and contribution analysis can be used in evaluations and impact assessment to explore the organisation's contribution to the changes noted. Organisation's would identify a couple of areas to assess throughout implementation as it would often be too cumbersome to assess all areas of change. Sometimes organisations select one pathway or group of changes.

Furthermore, assumptions that underpin the theory of change and causal links can become research questions for the organisation that are explored throughout the strategic period to strengthen the evidence base of the proposed high-level strategies and how they will contribute towards social change. It also enables an organisation to learn and be adaptive throughout the strategic implementation period if the theory is found to be weak or flawed. Often, one part of the change analysis may be weaker while another may be stronger and organisations can use this analysis to determine whether they want to skew resources. However, it is not always the strongest evidenced impact pathways that maximise impact, innovative and untested models will often have killer assumptions and weak evidence initially but it is critical for the organisation to be aware of this risk and build in learning points. The funding source may also effect an organisation's risk appetite for stronger or weaker evidenced theories.

The theory of change provides a coherent narrative for how the organisation's key intervention typologies contribute towards impact and the short, medium and long-term changes that need to be achieved as part of this journey. Assessing these changes is therefore a critical part of understanding and articulating the impact the organisation is contributing towards. Organisational, programme and project level M&E will be linked to the dimensions of change, ensuring the whole M&E framework is coherent and change focussed. As highlighted in section 3.1 above, the utilisation of the theory of change and linking to monitoring, evaluation and learning can bring the theory of change alive and add depth to the organisation's understanding of its impact and a reference point for how to mitigate risks and further enhance its contribution to change. Planning from the start of the theory of change approach for utilisation will help guide the process.

4. Conclusions & recommendations

Theory of change at an organisational level is a reflective, participatory approach that can be used to challenge an organisation's values, beliefs, principles & intervention logic. Furthermore, the approach enables evidence, research and participatory strategic decision making that can be tested throughout implementation to facilitate organisational learning and adaptation.

The theory of change approach enables an organisation to have a coherent narrative around how change happens and the impact it seeks to contribute towards linked to evidence and assumptions supporting those claims. Overwhelmingly, organisations consulted considered that when a theory of change approach is done well, it challenged them to look deeper in to complex change and beyond 'business as usual' to critique themselves on how they can be most effective. This led to a deep analysis of who and how they should partner with to leverage sustainable change.

A number of principles, observations and recommendations have been cited throughout this paper and twelve summary recommendations are noted below:

Recommendations

1. Be clear on the **purpose** of utilising an organisational ToC approach including audience, future usage and decisions it will inform (see Section 3.3, Phase 1)
2. ToC must use a **participatory process** and reflect the perspectives of those the organisation is claiming to impact (Section 3.3, Phase 1)
3. **Engagement and participation** in the ToC process should be defined from the outset to ensure correct input and ownership. Stakeholder engagement can vary from being involved in workshop, being consulted, part of a steering group etc (Section 3.3, Phase 1)
4. Identify the types of **outputs** you anticipate from the ToC process at the outset and for what purpose (Section 3.3, Phase 1)
5. Utilise the ToC to inform an **organisational M&E/Impact framework** that identifies areas of change and critical assumptions to assess (Section 3.3, Phase 3)
6. Allow **sufficient time** for developing, reflecting, being participatory, evidencing, utilising and adapting otherwise the value-add of the approach can be lost. (Section 3.3, Phase 2)
7. Define the **non-negotiables** at the outset of the process to frame the scope (Section 3.2)
8. Ensure a thorough **context analysis** is conducted that analyses environment, power and systems prior to assessing the organisation's role (Section 3.3, Phase 2)
9. **Build on existing work** including evidence, context analysis, research, stakeholder perspectives and existing ToCs at different levels without narrowing the opportunity to move in new directions. (See Section 3.3, Phase 1)
10. Be clear on **assumptions** the organisation is making and evidence, beliefs and views (See Section 3.3, Phase 2)
11. An organisation ToC adds most value at the start of a strategy process. Be clear on how it **links to strategy** and strategic choices (Section 3.2)
12. Be clear on the organisational **sphere of influence** and who it claims to impact. Review what level of change is reasonable for an organisation to consider it's contribution towards change for (Section 3.3, Phase 1)

13. Develop an organisational theory of change with necessary detail and then if required, produce a **summary version** for clearer communication that links to the detailed version (Section 3.3, Phase 2)

5. Appendix 1- interviewees

The following list of people/organisations were interviewed as part of developing the learning paper and their collective experience and wisdom has been utilised to develop this reflection on organisational theories of change as well as practical guidance.

Caroline Hoy (DFID), Maureen O’Flynn (Independent Consultant), Cathy James (Independent Consultant), Isabel Vogel (Independent Consultant), BookAid, Comic Relief, Stephanie Conrad (Plan International), Teleri Jardin (World Vision UK), Big Lottery Fund, Afrikids, MANGO, Nigel Simister (Independent Consultant), INTRAC, DanChurchAid, Mannion Daniels, Sarah Mistry (Bond), CAFOD, Help from Homes & Theory of Change Practitioners group.

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