THEORY OF CHANGE FOR PROGRAMS PLANNING, MONITORING AND EVALUATION

A mini-guide to planning, learning and documentation of the change we make

ABSTRACT

A stronger focus on changes (results) rather than activities. More clarity about the internal and external factors that may affect your program implementation. Stronger learning. These are some of the benefits of applying a Theory of Change approach to planning, monitoring and evaluation. This mini-guide outlines how.

Strategihuset, 2015

The text presented in this document is a contribution (chapter 4) to the CISU inspirational guide: **Theory of Change - How to navigate towards positive change in complex social settings, 2015**

Theory of Change – a definition

In project planning, as in life, we are generally guided by our own internal and implicit images – or mental models - of how the world works. These images guide the ways we think and act. This is true from how we raise our children to how we plan the next country programme to promote women's rights or to combat illiteracy in a developing country.

A "Theory of Change" (ToC) offers **an approach for critical reflection** about these internal, or implicit, mental models and for 'testing' them against our own life experiences and lessons learnt. It forces us to make our implicit rationale – our assumptions – explicit as we articulate how we think change will happen; how we can contribute to it; and the sequence(s) of changes we expect to result from our activities and efforts.

A ToC is **an approach to planning, learning**, **and documenting the** changes we development planners and practitioners make. It is a theory, in the sense that it represents **the best idea we have,** about how we can support changes AND we recognise that these ideas need to be constantly tested and refined. In that way we develop a stronger theory next time (which will also need to be tested).

ToC - a tool critical reflection of our interventoins

A Theory of Change **is not a substitute for a logical framework (LFA)** or other planning tools. However, it does help you qualify your planning, as it invites you to take a critical look at how you think the change process unfolds, from the start of your project's activities to the desired end results. It helps you reflect on all the assumptions that might either facilitate or 'block' your 'journey towards change'.

A theory of change approach **can be used at all stages of a project or programme cycle,** from planning, to monitoring and evaluation. This document describes, in six steps, how you can apply a TOC approach to planning, monitoring and evaluation.

Step 1 and 2: Understanding how change happens in our context and our own role in it

Project and programme planning never takes place in a vacuum. We always base our planning on our own implicit understanding of change dynamics and the role we can play in them. More often than not our planning is based on, or follows, previous interventions and methodologies that we have made and applied before.

However, change processes are never the same. They differ over time and from one context to another. In order to understand how change happens we need to be very clear about how the change process unfolds and the preconditions that must be in place for any vision to be achieved.

This element of thinking about how change happens is "big picture thinking". It allows us to clarify our own contribution to the change we want to see *as well as* the changes that we are unable to contribute to, but which need the contributions of others.

There are many means to, and sources for, understanding how change happens in our context:

- Conducting a context baseline and a context analysis is one means. Other valuable inputs to the analysis could be desk reviews, focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews with stakeholders and key informants, and hosting planning workshops with implementation partners.

- Drawing on lessons learnt and theory-based evaluations or outcome mappings might be useful.

Outcome mapping as part of the planning cycle

Outcome Mapping is a methodology that is used for planning and assessing development programming, at project and programme level, and that is oriented towards change and social transformation. Outcome mapping takes as its point of departure that "change is essentially about people relating to each other and their environment". Therefore, it focuses on changes in in behaviour, relationships, actions and activities in the people, groups, and organisations that it works with directly (i.e., outcomes). Outcome Mapping suggests that, in order to bring about impact (systemic change); there must be changes in the behaviour, relationships, actions and activities in the people, groups, and organisations that the intervention directly works with.

When you "map" outcome's you identify the outcomes of your activities – the planned and the unexpected – and you try to understand how and why these changes have taken place.

Mapping outcomes can be a very useful contribution to understand how change happens in our context and our own role in it. It can help us learn about our program's influence on the progression of change and encourage us to think more systematically and pragmatically about what our project or program does and how it contributes to bring about intended and unintended outcomes. This can help us clarify our own contribution and role in the change process and to design pathways for change based on the knowledge and experience we have already about our work.

Case 1: Outcome Mapping in a Social Change Program

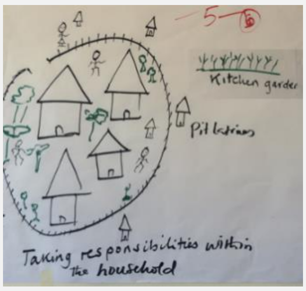
A group of NGOs decided to map the outcome of their previous work as an input to the design of a new program. The purpose of the program was to enable rural communities in Africa to hold local authorities accountable to the communities' civic and social rights. Originally, the NGOs had thought that to build capacity of communities to advocate for their rights, they needed training in advocacy planning, negotiation skills and working together as a group.

However, an outcome mapping exercise that included focus group discussions with previous program beneficiaries – mainly citizens from very poor communities – and workshops with field workers, revealed that several other factors but advocacy training were necessary to enable citizens to advocate for their own rights. These included

- Community members' had to have the self-esteem and belief that their voices counted and that they could make a difference in their own life and the life of others.
- Community members' own physical wellbeing should be secured (you don't advocate much if you are sick).
- Community members should be able to manage conflicts in their groups in a constructive and peaceful way.

The outcome mapping exercise clarified, that 'the journey for change' involved changes in the community members' perception of themselves as capable to manage their own personal and household affairs, protect their health and care for the needs of their children. It included changes in the way community members took responsibility in their own immediate household and changes in members' understanding and skills of how they could engage meaningfully local authorities – which was the original focus of the program idea.

The realization that not only advocacy skills but also changes in beneficiaries emotions, perceptions and group dynamics contributed to the motivation of individuals and groups to engage in advocacy helped clarify the program's future strategic approach to mobilize local communities to advocate for their rights..



Step 3 and 4: Articulating change pathways and assumptions about change

A theory of change should answer the following questions:

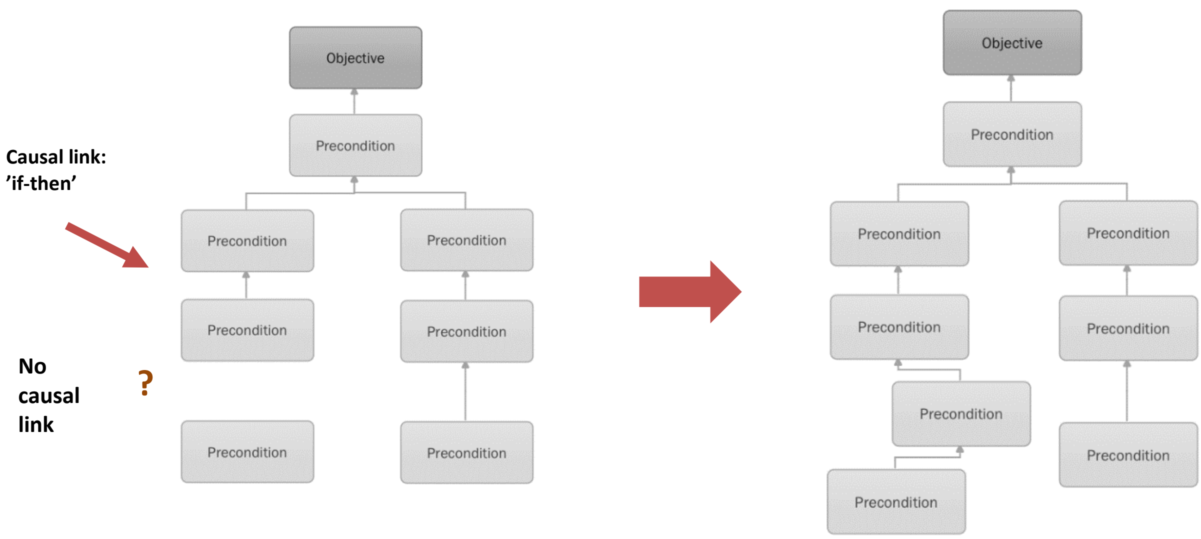
1. *Who* are you seeking to influence or benefit (target population)?
2. *What* benefits are you seeking to achieve (results)?
3. *When* will you achieve them (time period)?
4. *How* will you and others make this happen (activities, strategies, resources, etc.)?
5. *Where* and under what circumstances will you do your work (context)?
6. *Why* do you believe your theory will bear out. (assumptions)?

A theory of change approach is a **learning process** as much as a **product**. The real added value lies in its ability to facilitate reflection and awareness among project and programme planners about their own implicit thinking about how change happens and their own role in it. Such implicit 'mental models of change' affect the way we plan our programs and projects. We need to be aware of them if we want to learn from our experiences and adjust our thinking and project and programme planning to profit from the learnt lessons.

When we develop **change pathways,** we are describing how we think one change – often at output level – will contribute to other changes – either outputs or outcomes. We develop change pathways by identifying all the changes/preconditions that should be in place so that the project or programme can reach its goal. Then we put them in an order that makes sense to us. The result is a graphical illustration of how we think change takes place.

Developing change pathways is an opportunity for us to challenge ourselves in our planning, by articulating and assessing the logical and causal links between the interventions that we plan and the changes (outputs and outcomes) that we anticipate. Very often, this leads us to revise our planning, when we realise that important changes are missing in our change pathways, or when we identify assumptions that are critical, either to the project or programme implementation or to the context.

We check the causal links by joining the changes we have identified as key to reach our goal with a causal 'if-then' formulation. If the causal 'if-then' cannot be established, then changes may be missing and should be added to the pathway.



Assumptions

Assumptions are beliefs about (pre)conditions that prevail, and which we would not therefore need to consider in our planning.

Assumptions can relate to the context, the beneficiaries and stakeholders or to the intervention itself.
Some examples of assumptions could be:

- The interventions are relevant to the situation, we have the capacity to do this and our staff possesses the needed skills and insights.
- The interest, needs and response of *beneficiaries* and targets to our work has been taken into account. They want to work with us on this project.
- The policy's *context and* the influence of the actors external to the change process allow us to implement our interventions.

If it turns out that these assumptions are false, then we need to revise our thinking. Assumptions underpin our understanding of how change works, and why one chosen programme priorities or project framework functions better than others.

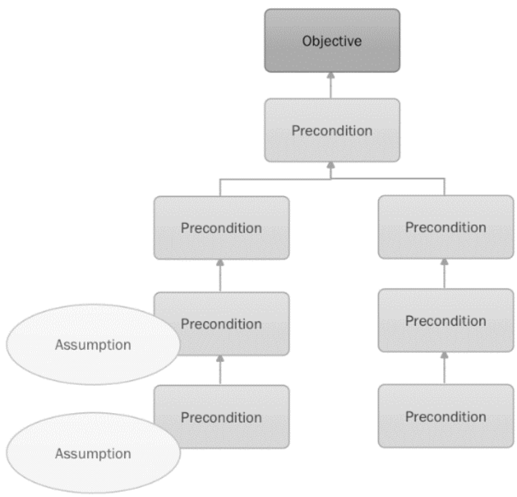
Articulating critical assumptions for each of a project's or programme's identified preconditions allows planners to assess if they have taken all imaginable considerations into account, or if anything has been missed out in developing a feasible strategy to reach the project's or programme's goal

Assumptions. An example

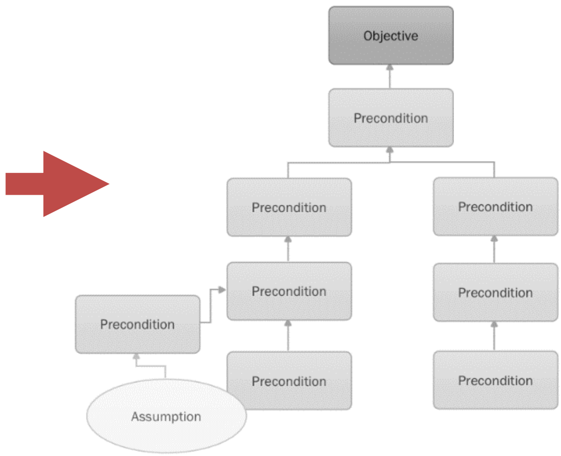
A critical assumption, in a project to enhance the capacity of local NGOs to engage in advocacy campaigns, may be that the local NGOs have staff to engage in advocacy, or that the organisations' Board and/or management support a more active advocacy profile within the organisation.

The intervention will become 'stuck' if any of these assumptions are flawed and nothing is done to create a situation where human resources are available in the organisation or unless the Board supports the idea.

If flawed assumptions are outside the influence of the programme or project – for instance because they are contextual - then planners must assess whether their stated outcomes or goals are realistic and be prepared to revise their pathways and articulated contribution to accordingly.

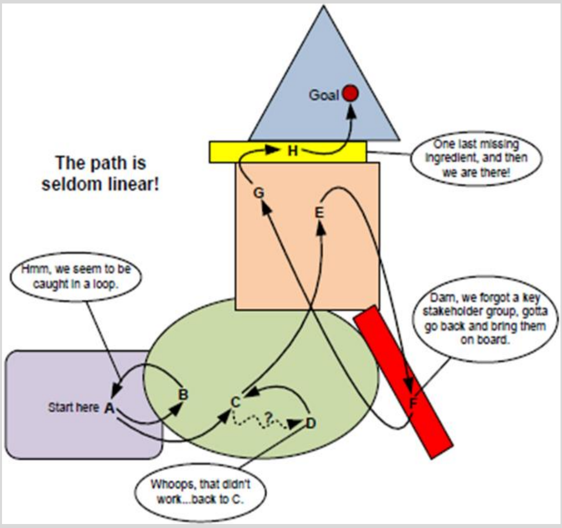


Valid assumptions leaves no reason to change the pathway



If an assumption is flawed, one or more preconditions must be added to the pathway.

Case 2: Providing a 'reality check' to advocacy programming through the articulation of pathways and assumptions.



An international NGO decided to develop change pathways and articulate critical assumptions as part of a 'quality check' of their national advocacy program in Egypt. The program's goal was to contribute to a situation where national legislation and policy making reflected women's equal rights, needs and concerns.

The aim was to contribute to this by strengthening the capacity of local CSOs to represent the interests and rights of women in national, regional and international policy fora. Developing change pathways and explaining how and why the program interventions would strengthen capacity of local CSOs, helped program staff to a number of important recognitions not reflected in the initial program idea:

When staff developed change pathways they realized, that it was probably much more time consuming and challenging to enable local CSOs to represent rights and needs of their constituencies than originally articulated. Discussions revealed, that the CSOs' willingness and ability to truly involve constituencies in priority setting would probably depend on a number factors that the staff had not thought of previously. These included for instance the CSO managements' willingness to promote transparency in management of funds and participatory approach to decision-making.

Articulating the complexity of motivating CSOs to truly represent interests of women led the program staff to revise their program outcomes and communication to donors about what they could realistically achieve in a 3-year program period.

A complicating factor was the program's critical assumption that national CSO management teams and board members would be interested in working with the international NGO on the organizational development issues identified. Program staff described the working relationship with the CSOs as a relationship of reciprocity, trust and commitment. Yet, the fact that the program intervention was challenging power relations within CSOs (e.g. by working towards greater transparency and staff involvement in decision making), and the fact that other international donors provided much larger pools of funds to their work could potentially challenge the motivation of CSO management teams to engage in organizational capacity building.

At the time of planning, program staff were unable to determine whether the assumption about CSO management teams' willingness to participate in the program was true or flawed. Thus, it was decided that the assumption should be critically assessed during the program's regular monitoring procedures. Program interventions would be revised later on, if the assumption turned out to be flawed.

Step 5 and 6: Monitoring change processes and the feasibility of our assumptions – and adjusting projects and programs accordingly

Applying a ToC approach, during implementation and monitoring, helps us understand how and why our work contributes to change. On the basis of this, we can assess the feasibility, relevance and effectiveness of our work against contextual changes and critical assumptions, as well as against our 'real time' experiences of how change 'unfolds'. Based on this, we can make necessary the revisions to our project or programme strategy and implementation.

A ToC that adequately describes; the actions, the desired change and the outcomes/preconditions that will lead us to this change and the strategy's underlying assumptions, is essential for a theory based approach to monitoring and evaluating programs and projects.

Knowing this critical information will enable us to monitor and assess the programme/project's outcomes. We can compare those outcomes to our original thoughts about how change is made and will be able to assess whether they are still relevant to helping us achieve our goal. Finally we can revise our programme strategy according to our findings, if necessary.

When/how do we assess our programme's preliminary impact and progress?

Using a ToC-approach, during programme implementation, in order to assess the progress and viability of our thinking about change, need not be time-consuming or costly. The challenge, however, is to identify the relevant moments when programme Implementers and stakeholders need to meet to reflect critically on how their think they are contributing to change, in light of contextual changes and programme lessons learnt.

Relevant occasions may be (but not limited to):

- **Kick-off meetings with key stakeholders at the start of the programme or project's implementation**: A kick-off meeting provides an opportunity to ensure that project staff, partners and other key stakeholders all share a common understanding of how change is expected to occur, and defines their roles in that change. The staff who are implementing the project or programme can also review the project's theories of change when they create work-plans and review baseline results. There may be critical issues to address during kick-off meetings such as the continuing validity of assumptions and major changes in context, since the programme strategy was decided.

- **Bi-annual partner programme meetings and mid-term reviews:** Bi-annual and annual meetings between programme partners and stakeholders provide an opportunity to reflect critically on the programme's strategy and to foster joint learning and understanding. It will give the relevant parties the chance to review how change happens and to make the necessary revisions of the programme's strategy. This in turn will strengthen the likelihood that the programme's goal(s) will be achieved.

Critical questions to ask include:

- How, and to what extent, did we create the preconditions that we thought were necessary to bring about the desired change (impact)?

- What – if any – were the unexpected outcomes of our work so far, and how are these outcomes likely to contribute to the desired change?

- Did we consider the correct factors and dynamics in the initial design or assessment of our programme, or have other preconditions/ outcomes for change turned out to be crucial to realising our goal?

- Has anything unexpected occurred within the environment, that was not foreseen and which might necessitate a more nuanced approach?
- What does this tell us about our assumptions? Are they all still valid or are they flawed?

- Based on the answers to the above questions, are there gaps in our strategy for bringing about change. Do we need to revise our pathways, and if so how?

Case 3: Impact assessment and real-time adjustment of an Aids-programme 'as we move ahead'.

A group of NGOs began a programme aimed at combatting discrimination and promoting quality HIV/AIDS health services for HIV positive patients and for people undergoing voluntary testing.

Their programme was based on the understanding that

- ***if*** patients and citizens undergoing testing knew about their rights and claimed those right, in accordance with the protocols that health practitioners had to apply and

- ***if*** health practitioners themselves were properly informed and had the capacity to apply these protocols,

- ***then*** patients would receive services in a patient-friendly environment without discrimination or humiliation.

Consequently, the programme set out to train health practitioners and patients/citizens alike.

One year into the programme the NGOs assessed the preliminary impact (progress) of their work and realised that their thinking about change was incomplete. Even though patients were educated by the programme, and did file complaints when they experienced cases of mal-treatment, and even though health practitioners knew how to apply patient-friendly health protocols, discrimination and humiliation was still widespread.

This caused the NGOs to revise their programme strategy, to focus not only on the capacity of health staff, but on the motivation and incentives for them to apply their knowledge, and their capacity to provide patient-friendly services. Amongst other things, the NGOs intensified their cooperation with the managers of the targeted health clinics and worked to address the fears and prejudices of health practitioners towards people undergoing testing for or living with HIV/AIDS. The fears and prejudices of the health practitioners had turned out to be a much more serious issues than first anticipated. This stemmed partially from the media's campaign of blaming of people living with HIV/AIDS. As this attitude became more prevalent in public discourse and the media it seemed to be having a detrimental effect the attitudes of the health professionals as well.

Applying a Theory of Change Approach at the end of project or programme evaluations

Applying a ToC approach to programme completion and for end-of programme evaluations can help us assess the continuing and future relevance and effectiveness of our programme to contribute to change.

Theory-based evaluations help assess whether our underlying thinking and assumptions about how change happened were correct, by identifying the causal links between our activities and the changes that they 'triggered' or contributed to. Theory based evaluations explore the mechanisms (processes and changes) which we believe made our programme effective and compares these with collected information and evidence.

Theory-based evaluations begin by identifying and articulating a programme's implicit 'theory' or belief in how change happens. This may require additional steps, if a programme's ToC was not articulated before or at the onset o, the project or programme, or if it needs revision. (This equates to Steps One to Four in the ToC reflection cycle). Thus, it is possible to conduct a theory-based evaluation of a programme, even though the approach was not applied during project or programme planning or during implementation.

The second step in a theory based evaluation is to test this 'theory' to investigate whether/why/how the programme caused intended or observed changes as expected, by exploring the validity of the theory's key assumptions and contextual changes that may have influenced the theory (This equates to Steps Five and Six in the reflection cycle).

There are often multiple 'Theories of Change' or 'change pathways' in large-scale country or thematic programs that involve several components. It may not be feasible to review each and every theory or aspect of a program. In such cases, the purpose of the evaluation will guide the selection of which pathways will be tested.

The development and explicit articulation of the multiple levels of theories of change provides for greater efficiency in evaluating problems and identifying and successes. For instance, the overall ToC for a sector or country programme may be perceived to be sound, but the pathways for change for specific interventions under the country programme could have issues. Thus, an evaluation will determine that instead of faulting the entire ToC at the sector or country programme level, corrections could be made at the project level. Equally, a successful project level ToC can be singled out and evaluated for the positive lessons learned, even if the overall ToC failed to accomplish its goal.

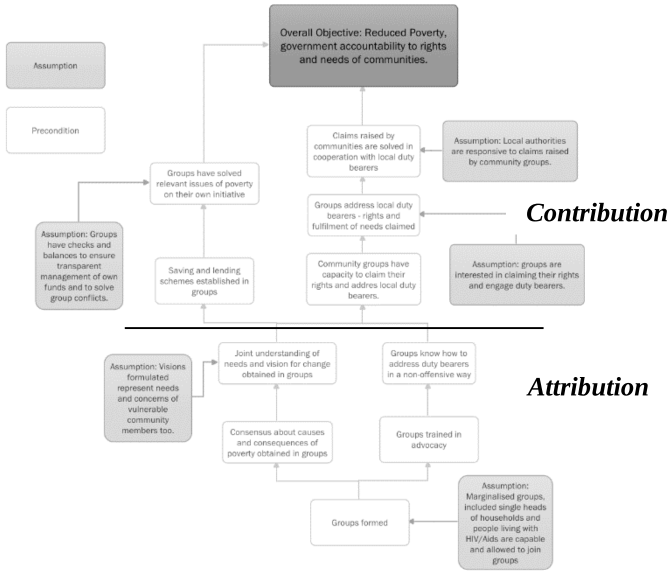
The goal was achieved, but how did we contribute to it?

Theory based evaluations help us assess what has changed, as well as how and why. However, because of the complexity of social change, particularly at the level of the larger programs, it is rarely possible to *attribute* change to one specific actor alone. Seeking to do so will usually lead to an inaccurate conclusion. Instead, programme stakeholders may look for meaningful evidence of a *contribution* to programme change.

Attribution involves drawing causal links and explanatory conclusions between observed changes and specific interventions. In most programs (and projects in particular) there may be certain programme milestones or results, in our change pathways, that can be directly *attributed* to our work and for which the programme can be held accountable. Other programme results may be the outcome of joint actions and the *contributions* of several actors.

Main steps in a contribution analysis

- Clarify the theory of change. What was the change your assumed would happen as a consequence of your work?
- Gather existing evidence on the viability and relevance of the Theory of Change. Did change happen the way you expected?
- Identify and acknowledge the attribution problem. Can change be attributed to our work alone or did other external factors contribute too?
- Gather existing evidence of your contribution and the contribution of other factors and actors.



It can be difficult and expensive to determine the extent to which a successful outcome was achieved as a result of our efforts, rather than other actors or factors. However, it is a crucial exercise; by demonstrating the contribution of a programme to key outcomes the broader value of the programme is shown.

Introducing an **accountability line** in our change pathways may help us distinguish between the programme's *contribution* to and its *attribution* to a programme result. This is useful, both to harmonise donors', programme planners' and implementers' expectations of what a programme can reasonably achieve as well as to design feasible result frameworks

Another way to assess contribution and attribution is to distinguish between

- Spheres of direct influence - this usually means the direct work with our beneficiaries and targets.
- Spheres of indirect influence - which includes the changes programme beneficiaries make (inspired or empowered by our support).
- Spheres of interest – which are often the systemic, longer term changes we aim for and which guide our vision and mission.

Case 4: Measuring a Programme's Attribution and Contribution to the outcome of International Climate Negotiations.

In order to persuade the European Commission to scale up climate finance to poor and developing countries, a coalition of Danish and international NGOs engaged in an advocacy programme. It aimed at engaging in non-confrontational cooperative relationships with decision makers. Its second aim was to build the capacity of civil society actors in developing countries to engage in advocacy alliances effectively and to work towards influencing and building international climate negotiations.

The programme's rationale was that

- ***If*** national coalitions of NGOs from developing countries participated actively, effectively and jointly in international advocacy alliances, climate talks and negotiations ***and***
- ***If*** lobbied interventions targeted at decision makers were conducted in a non-confrontational way
- ***Then*** *the European Commission might be convinced to scale-up climate finance, in order to support poor and developing countries' efforts to adapt and mitigate the consequences of climate change. (The programme rationale had several other nuances, but only the aspects relevant to the example are included here).*

The evaluation found that the project rationale (assumptions about how change would happen) was indeed relevant and that important progress had been made towards the overall objective, in terms of policy commitment and dialogue with international decision makers.

However, in the advocacy context which comprised of hundreds, if not thousands, of international players, it was unclear how to demonstrate the programme's contribution to the results and therefore how to show the programme's broader value.

To remedy that the evaluation distinguished between the results which were directly and wholly attributable to the programme and the results to which the programme had contributed to in some way.

No-one else had worked to build the capacity of national NGO coalitions in developing countries. The subsequent facts and findings, from interviews and focus group discussions, led to an evaluation that concluded that the coalitions' ability to influence their own national decision makers to present their concerns in international climate talks, and to act as one joint group, was directly attributable to the programme.

The evaluation also found that the strengthened coalitions of NGOs and the more effective participation of 'southern voices' had improved the ability of the NGOs, responsible for implementation, to *contribute* to policy processes inside the European Commission. The officials and decision makers who were interviewed confirmed this. They found that the NGOs' inputs and suggestions were very useful in their own work and the fact that these inputs were rooted in an international coalition, with a strong participation of southern voices, made them more credible and reliable. The input and suggestions from the programme stakeholders were used thereafter by the decision makers in policy briefs and were reflected in the key decisions made concerning the issue of climate finance.

So, although the evaluation was unable to conclude *how much* the programme had contributed to policy changes, it was able to conclude – both from interviews and from the evidence of written materials that important contributions had been made.

Literature for inspiration

- Comic Relief: Theory of Change Review, 2012
- DFID: Review of the use of 'Theory of Change' in
- International development, 2013
- Search for Common Ground: Practical Approaches to Theories of Change in Conflict, Security, and Justice Programmes, 2013
- Matthew Forti 2012: Six Theory of Change Pitfalls to Avoid.
- Hivos/UNDP: ToC: A thinking and action approach to navigate in the complexity of social change processes, 2011