## **Applying the Theory of Change Approach**

### **Definition**

A theory of change is an ongoing process of reflection to explore **why** change is needed and **how** it happens. For UNICEF, a Theory of Change (ToC) presents the broad vision of what results will be achieved and how they will be achieved. A ToC articulates the theories and assumptions that underpin the anticipated change process through which, inputs and activities are converted to or lead to identified outputs, outcomes and impact.

A ToC is a structured thinking process that allows stakeholders to formulate more realistic goals, clarify accountabilities and establish a common understanding of the strategies to be used to achieve results. As all information relevant to the success of a programme are rarely known at the stage of its design, ToCs allow for the formulation and testing of hypotheses about how change is likely to occur, introducing a level of experimentation and learning to programme design and implementation.

An effective ToC is country-specific, articulates a strategic vision for reaching a desired situation, and makes explicit how one level of results leads to another. The process of developing a ToC is richer when stakeholders are involved, allowing them to bring to bear their experience, knowledge and insights on how change can effectively happen.

### **Purpose**

Theories of change are critical to results-based management as they serve to:

* ensure that the programme leads to tangible results that add up to the desired change
* present an easy-to-understand vision of how the desired results will be achieved
* clarify the programme logic
* identify appropriate participants and partners critical to results achievement
* enable organisations to assess their contribution to change
* prepare for effective programme evaluations

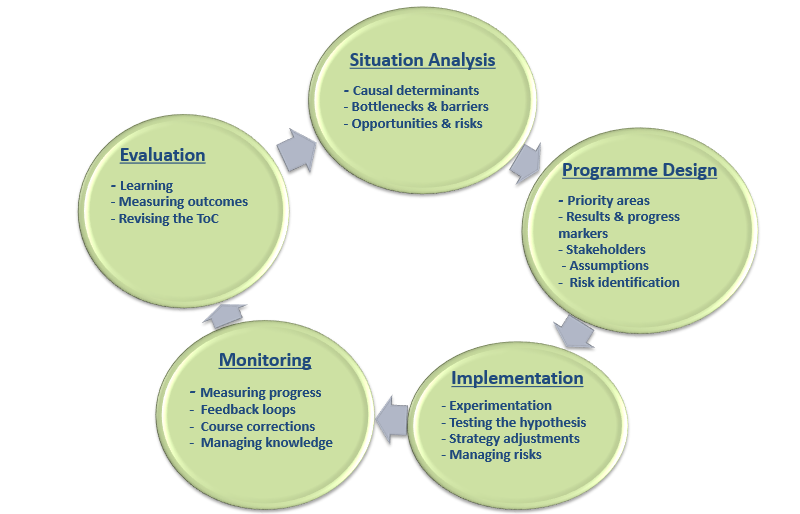
A ToC is different from a logical framework or results matrix as it brings a stronger focus on the process as well as its outcome. Whilst a logical framework serves primarily as a project management tool, a ToC broadly maps out a strategic vision, and possible pathways to achieve this vision in a complex and changing environment, with other stakeholders. The specific characteristics and differences between a ToC and a Logical Framework are outlined in the table below:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Theory of Change | Logical Framework |
| Critical thinking | Representation |
| Pathways of change | Lists relevant programme components |
| Explanation of how and why change occurs | Description of change elements |
| Adaptive and iterative relationships and influences | Linear and predictable cause and effect relationship |
| Articulates a strategic vision | Project management tool |

### **ToC in the Programming Cycle**

A ToC can be used at different stages of the programme cycle, as illustrated in the graphic below and further elaborated in subsequent paragraphs.

**Figure: Theory of Change in the Programming Cycle**

****

**Situation Analysis**

An adequate ToC builds on an accurate analysis of the existing situation and evidence of how change happens in the context. An understanding of causalities establishes a foundation for the development a sound ToC. A good situation analysis also recognises elements of context that are especially difficult to predict because they are fluid and unstable. In some cases, a situation analysis will be about reframing a problem as a potential opportunity. A ToC must reflect and explain such contextual complexities.

The identification of key stakeholders and understanding their roles and influence in the development of a situation analysis is an important step in charting out pathways of change, which will invariably involve them.

**Programme Design**

The Theory of Change is articulated during the programme design stage. Articulating a Theory of Change supports sound programme design as:

1. programme areas are prioritised, results formulated, and the interventions that need to bring about the desired change are outlined;
2. programme boundaries are clarified, identifying where the programme sits, what other areas it interacts with and how it is influenced by its wider context;
3. it allows adequate attention to outcomes that are beyond the direct influence of the programme but that are critical to the programme’s success and its potential to make a difference to the main problem;
4. performance measures are defined, indicating how progress on results will be ascertained;
5. strategies for translating inputs into activities and then to results are identified on the understanding of their comparative impact, the specific bottlenecks to be addressed, existing knowledge of what works, and considerations of feasibility and sustainability;
6. assumptions based on beliefs, tacit knowledge, experience, and empirical evidence are made explicit on how outputs will turn into intended outcomes; considering preconditions necessary for success, and considering the potential of alternative strategies;
7. appropriate participants and partners critical to the problem and to achieving the desired results are identified and involved in programme design;
8. Risks to the achievement of the desired result such as natural disasters, conflict, epidemics, economic downturn or capacity gaps, are considered and mitigation measures are formulated.

**Implementation**

Implementation is about doing, and occurs through an appreciation of how the scope of a strategy or synergies between strategies will support the achievement of a result. Strategies determine the nature and types of activities that will support the realization of the theory of change.

The choice and mix of programme strategies and their corresponding interventions enable the testing of the hypotheses upon which the theory of change is constructed. Testing the validity of the hypotheses through interventions, modelling and pilots will support scale-up possibilities or eventual modification.

Strategies typically used in UNICEF assisted programmes as identified in the 2014-2017 Strategic Plan will often include one or a combination of the following:

[Capacity Development](https://unicef.sharepoint.com/teams/OED/PPPManual/SiteAssets/Programme%20Policy%20and%20Procedure%20Manual.aspx?uid=58) including [Communication for Development](https://unicef.sharepoint.com/teams/OED/PPPManual/SiteAssets/Programme%20Policy%20and%20Procedure%20Manual.aspx?uid=59), [Evidence Generation, Policy Dialogue and Advocacy and Knowledge Management](https://unicef.sharepoint.com/teams/OED/PPPManual/SiteAssets/Programme%20Policy%20and%20Procedure%20Manual.aspx?uid=60) [Partnerships](https://unicef.sharepoint.com/teams/OED/PPPManual/SiteAssets/Programme%20Policy%20and%20Procedure%20Manual.aspx?uid=62) [South-South and Triangular Cooperation](https://unicef.sharepoint.com/teams/OED/PPPManual/SiteAssets/Programme%20Policy%20and%20Procedure%20Manual.aspx?uid=63); [Identification and Promotion of Innovation](https://unicef.sharepoint.com/teams/OED/PPPManual/SiteAssets/Programme%20Policy%20and%20Procedure%20Manual.aspx?uid=64) ; [Support to integration and cross-sectoral linkages](https://unicef.sharepoint.com/teams/OED/PPPManual/SiteAssets/Programme%20Policy%20and%20Procedure%20Manual.aspx?uid=65); [Service Delivery](https://unicef.sharepoint.com/teams/OED/PPPManual/SiteAssets/Programme%20Policy%20and%20Procedure%20Manual.aspx?uid=66)

**Monitoring**

Theories of Change are reviewed collectively at specific moments for continued relevance or adjustments, where needed. Progress towards the achievement of results is reviewed and the efficacy of chosen pathways ascertained. Based on monitoring data and other evidence from direct interventions, course corrections are made, if necessary. New insights feed implementation and ongoing situation analysis.

Effective communication, strong relationships with stakeholders, programme reviews, assessments and ongoing situation monitoring are key to supporting effective feedback mechanisms needed to ensure the continuing relevance and adequacy of the programme’s design.

Feedback loops with key stakeholders are significant for: i) testing and adjusting the Theory of Change as conditions evolve; ii) constant consideration of risks and assumptions, to infuse programming with reality-checks; iii) keeping a pulse on progress with results to enable quick adjustments, as warranted, and iv) introducing flexibility to programme design.

**Evaluation**

Evaluation supports the review, testing and re-design of a ToC at the early stages of implementation, during implementation or after intervention has been concluded. Evaluations will try to make the links between activities and results, outline causalities, and present an analysis of how change has actually come about on the basis of hard evidence. In this regard, counterfactuals may also be considered.

An evaluability assessment, early in programme implementation can serve to adjust the theory of change to make it more realistic or adjusted to the changes in the context as well as to strengthen systems to monitor and evaluate the programme. Sound evaluations are often conducted of existing theories of change or elaborated in order to ascertain the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability of interventions.

### **Developing a Theory of Change**

Theories of Change may be developed at several levels – for a programme or policy, for an entire country programme or a strategic plan or for an intervention. Related terminology that could be used for such an exercise may be a conceptual framework, a programme vision, or a logic model.

All these invariably contribute to presenting a vision of how change occurs or is expected to occur.

Where ever a Theory of Change is applied, it is important to note that its development is not likely to happen in one sitting. However it is approached, the development of a ToC is an iterative exercise.

|  |
| --- |
| Steps to creating a theory of change |
| 1. Identify the desired change 2. Conduct a “backwards mapping” to identify the preconditions necessary to achieve that desired state 3. Identify the interventions and activities that the change initiative will need to perform to create these preconditions 4. Develop indicators for each precondition that will be used to assess the performance of the interventions 5. Write a narrative that can be used to summarise the various moving parts of your theory of change   *Adapted from Anderson, A. (2005).The community builder’s approach to a theory of change. The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change.* |

Creating a theory of change from an approach such as the one described in the box above enables the consideration of perspectives without the feelings of being tethered that can occur with developing logic models. For instance, using the “*..because*..” formula and the reverse “*if..then*” logic, one can move from the desired state and map out the conditions necessary for that change to happen.

*“A child living with disabilities is learning because….she is cared for and protected by her family, community and national services….”.*

As a reflective process, it can be messy, but free of jargon, enabling the consideration of pathways to change by knowledgeable stakeholders. Once the pathway has been mapped out, it becomes easier to develop a strong logic model or a results chain with SAMRTly formulated results and indicators. This may then warrant revisions to the initial ToC. Hence a Theory of Change may be elaborated prior to the development of a results chain or used to refine one that is already developed. When used to review an existing results chain, it allows for a validation of the “if…then” logic.

Development of a ToC relies on evidence and sound processes. A technically sound ToC relies on adequate research and gaining knowledge and perspectives on how change happens in the specific country context, as well as expert opinion and perspectives about what is likely to work or not. A sound process implies that there are opportunities for key stakeholders to participate in the development of the ToC. External facilitation may help reach agreement and manage diverse perspectives.

The products of a Theory of Change are often presented as a combination of:

* A short **written document** which describes each of the elements of the Theory of Change and how the fit together.
* A **graphic** which demonstrates how results will be achieved through a multi-year series of actions.

**Practical considerations**

### **Determine how the process and product will be used**

A ToC can be used at different stages of the programme cycle, namely during programme design, programme implementation and monitoring, and during reviews and evaluation. It is important to discuss and agree with development partners on the different uses of the ToC during the programme cycle.

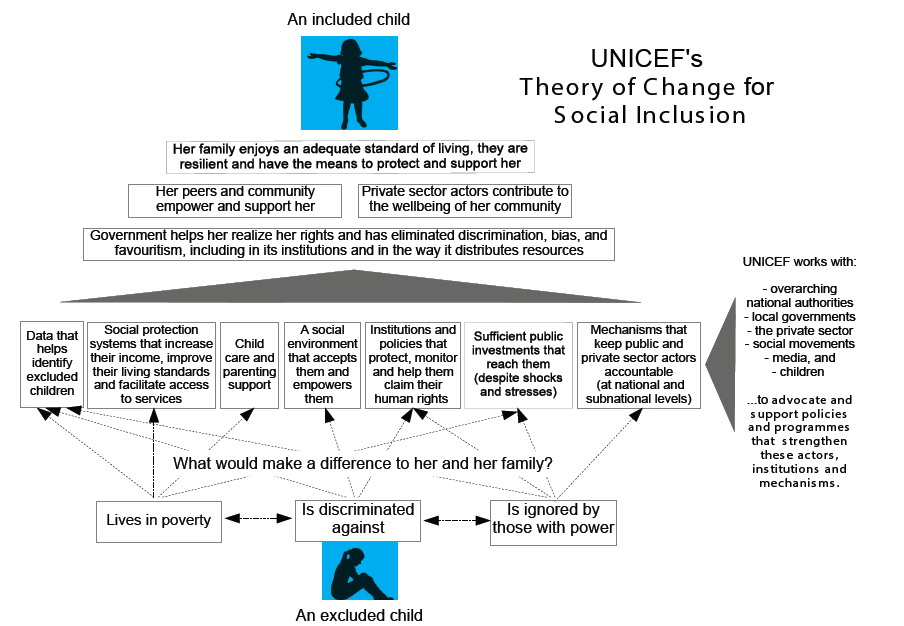
This also requires determining how at the programming stage, the ToC will apply. For instance a ToC may be applied at an inter-agency level during the development of the UNDAF or the Integrated Strategic Framework. Theories of Change may also be developed following this for specific country programme documents (CPD), programmes and even projects.

### **Decide who should be involved and how**

Developing the ToC together with development partners is critical to bringing in a variety of perspectives, and to increase ownership and buy-in. As such, careful consideration must be made of which stakeholders to engage and how to maintain momentum during the process. Stakeholders’ role in validating the ToC must be considered. Consideration must also be given to potential sensitivities in the development of a ToC, and how these sensitivities and possible conflicts will be managed.

### **Practical considerations of time, resources and stakeholders**

To render the process of developing a ToC effectively and efficiently, it is critical to make use of available research, knowledge and perspectives. Existing knowledge can consist of Situation Analyses, and other studies, evaluations, and lessons learned. Engaging other development partners can bring in valuable knowledge and perspectives as well. Practical considerations including time and resources can help determine how many stakeholders to engage and how best to engage them. Developing the ToC in a workshop setting, possibly with the use of external facilitation, is one possible way the ToC can developed collaboratively with partners.



References & Resources

* Purposeful Program Theory: Effective Use of Theories of Change and Logic, Sue C. *Funnell, Patricia J. Rogers, 2011.*
* [UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2014-2017; Realizing the rights of every child, especially the most disadvantaged](http://www.unicef.org/strategicplan/files/2013-21-UNICEF_Strategic_Plan-ODS-English.pdf). UNICEF, 2013.
* [Revised Supplementary Programme Note on the Theory of Change for the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2014-2017](https://unicef-my.sharepoint.com/personal/aboelens_unicef_org/Documents/Anna/Guidance/Theory%20of%20Change/Revised%20Supplementary%20Programme%20Note%20on%20the%20Theory%20of%20Change%20for%20the%20UNICEF%20Strategic%20Plan,%202014-2017). UNICEF, 2014.
* [Theories (Assumptions of Change) for “Education for Peace building Practitioners”, Draft PowerPoint 19 Nov. 2012](http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&frm=1&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwiW853uxP_JAhXClB4KHT5XC7sQFggfMAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.educationandtransition.org%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2012%2F06%2FTheories-of-Change.pptx&usg=AFQjCNHrICDPtX4QKg5H182Fb2Fqd4zSQw&sig2=IX3oL-gDCDJASjyAMlD1IA)
* [Theories of Change in International Development: Communication, Learning, or Accountability?](http://www.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/JSRP/downloads/JSRP17.Valters.pdf) Craig Valters, 2014.
* [Understanding Theory of Change in International Development.](http://www.theoryofchange.org/wp-content/uploads/toco_library/pdf/UNDERSTANDINGTHEORYOFChangeSteinValtersPN.pdf) Danielle Stein and Craig Valters, 2012.
* [Impact Evaluation in UN Agency Evaluation Systems: Guidance on Selection, Planning and Management.](http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&frm=1&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwixiIWrxP_JAhUHqR4KHWQQAL4QFggdMAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.uneval.org%2Fdocument%2Fdownload%2F1880&usg=AFQjCNEXF_EUzc4MSnPcY9485rQl8cwWuQ&sig2=GJxOSxc8fvDvX1kEe8BK7w) UNEG, August 2013