

Defining 'Theory of Change'

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Contributors to the discussion were: Srilatha Bathliwala, Karel Chambille, Susana Rochna, Ramesh Singh, Louise Clark, Doug Reeler, and Marjan van Es, whose experiences and words we value and share in the text.

'Theories of change' have moved from an academic sounding idea to obligatory processes in some development agencies. But what do we mean with the term?

The term '**theory of change**' (ToC) is used to mean quite different things – a picture, a process, a set of activities, a deep philosophy about action. Within the work that Hivos is undertaking on ToC, it is used to refer to both a process and an output. Many organisations use the term when talking about their strategy or action plan. But for us, a ToC process requires looking beyond only a strategy for action.

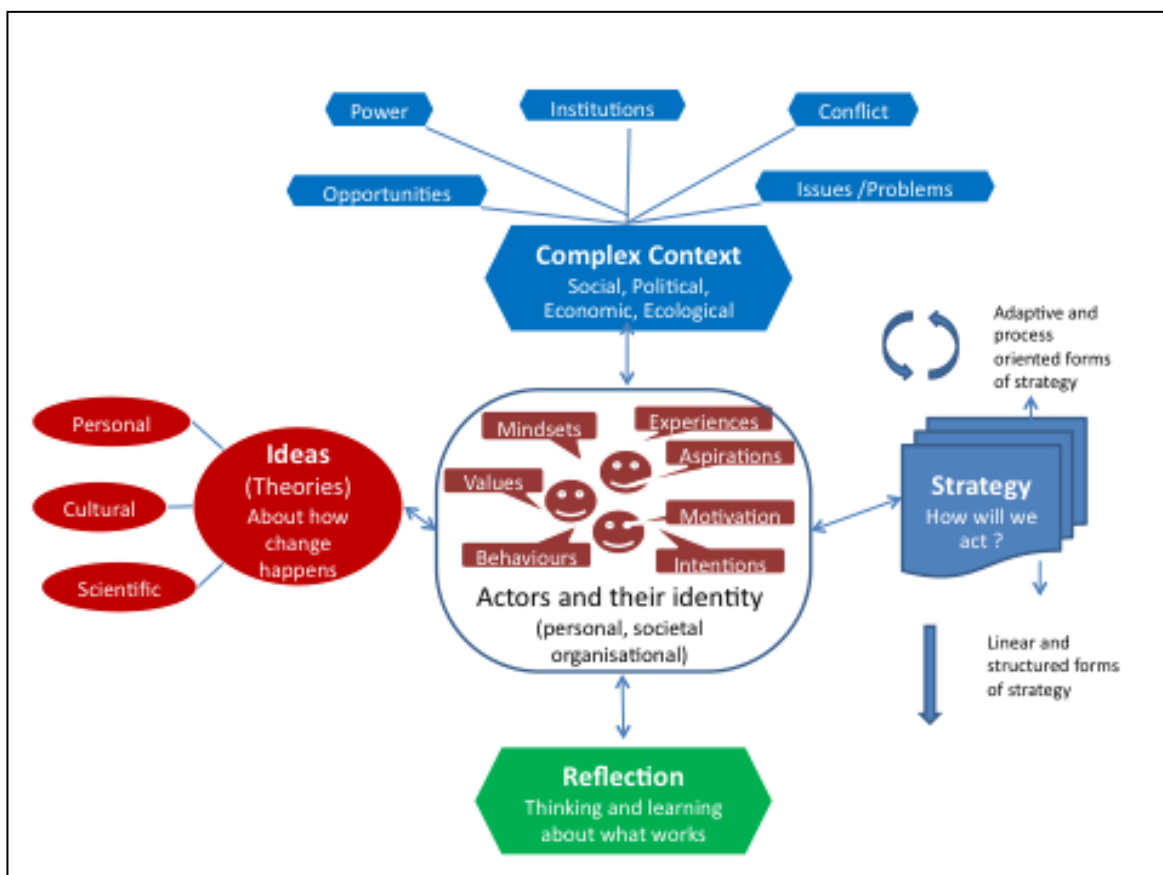
ToC is 'a style of thinking, a way to organize your desired intervention, to scope on a desired change and the best route to achieve it' (Rochna).

A 'road map', that should be practical and include concrete tools in order to 'read the map'. (Clark)

Figure 1 shows that it involves five elements:

- 1) The **actors** (individuals or groups) who are trying to bring about change;
- 2) The **context** or situation that influences the actors and which they are trying to change;
- 3) The **ideas** or theories that influence the actors when they consider how to act in a certain situation at a situation;
- 4) The **strategic plan** that describes the reasons and provides a framework for taking particular action; and
- 5) The **reflection and decision-making processes** that help actors to develop strategy, review success and failure and make improvements to ideas and strategies.

Figure 1. What is involved in a Theory of Change? (Woodhill 2010)



Behind this diagram lies the following story ...

People, because of their history, culture, education and psychology have personal **values**, **aspirations** and **desires** and see the world around them in particular ways. People are constantly trying to figure out how to intervene in their situation to create ‘improvements’ or at least to try and maintain what they value, as the **context** around them changes. And it always does this because others are constantly intervening and causing change.... In their **context**, people experience an ever-changing set of problems but usually also have (some) opportunities for change. To analyse their situation, people draw on a background set of ‘**ideas**’. Some of these ideas come from personal experience, some are deeply embedded cultural ideas and some are scientific ‘ideas’ or academic theory. We could also call these ideas altogether ‘**theory**’. This personal ‘theory’ is the set of **assumptions** that individuals or

Doug Reeler: “We started asking more intently “how does change happen?” before we ask “how do we make change happen?”. ... if we better observed and understood inherent, archetypal processes of change, forces already at work, ... then our interventions could be designed to work within these existing processes, to reshape or stimulate something already happening, towards more healthy outcomes.

groups hold about what exists in the world, how change happens and what is of value. These ideas, together with context-specific considerations and people’s values and aspirations, influence the choice of **strategy** for changing the world. The strategy that people and organisations pursue may be intuitive and almost automatic, or very carefully analysed and justified. In organisations, professional work strategies tend to be more formalised, while in our private and cultural lives they generally more informal. **Reflection** processes bring actors together to work out the best ways of acting, to question and evaluate existing ideas and assumptions, and to review the results of their actions.

ToC thinking for us refers to *a systematic questioning of four dimensions – ideas, personal values, context and related strategies - and making explicit one’s assumptions and position*. By investing in such reflection, we assume that the relevance and effectiveness of chosen strategies will improve – and timely adaptation en route will be possible. Such reflection means working with different people and groups to make more explicit their underlying ideas, opening spaces for mutual accountability, being more focused and critical about situation analysis, and being more questioning when identifying strategies.

While the diagram looks tidy and controllable, our daily working context is far from that! Our contexts are ‘complex’ in the sense of being unpredictable to a large extent, involving a range of different players at different levels working to lever for change. Opportunities obstacles suddenly arise and stagnation can suddenly switch to success, or success be followed by setbacks. This complexity makes it less useful to define with great precision what can be guaranteed but requires a more adaptive approach to action. So a ToC is always evolving.

“ToC thinking (or: a ToC approach) offers actors involved in socio-political change processes a sense-making framework which they develop themselves and that they can use throughout the process to articulate, question and adapt the what, why and how (and the why of the how) of their efforts, in continuous interaction with the reality they live.” Marjan van Es

Below are 6 topics that were discussed in the first e-dialogue.

1. How Organisations ‘do’ ToC

ToC thinking is emerging in many organisations but its integration in formal processes varies greatly. At the Open Society Foundation, there is no formal or explicit ToC, although overarching assumptions and beliefs are made explicit. While the term is not used, ToC is thus implicit in organisational strategies. At Hivos Costa Rica, ToC thinking is considered a result of workshops, and is used as an

implicit model of work. It is also common to be explicit about the desired change, and with which actors and in which context these are to be achieved. However, Rochna says, a logframe style of working is still very common at the Hivos office and its partners. It is most common in the context of external funding requirements; in preparation of proposals for donors (among them the Dutch government). But is also part of the contextual analysis of a partner organisation. At Oxfam America (Peru), the use of ToC is more advanced, with explicit and formal ToCs existing for separate programmes, as well as a national overarching strategy ‘to explore how 4 different programmes of 3 different Oxfams create a coherent whole’. However, here too few guidelines exist about the terminology and practice. At OA strategies and implementation plans inform the ToC instead of the other way around. The recently introduced annual impact reflection workshop is aimed at scrutinizing and adjusting their ToC.

Doug Reeler of CDRA refers to two kinds of ToC - ‘grand theory’ and ‘practice theorising’. The ‘grand theory’ version is looking back and asks ‘how does social change happen?’, bringing together ideas from our own experiences and conceptual knowledge from others. These theories of change can be inappropriate, static and out-dated. This contrasts with theorising from practice, which is future oriented: *“Observing and reflecting on the situation, assisted by the questions/lenses of change archetypes we find helpful, to understand both what is happening now and what is possible in future, and then designing approaches and logical interventions (or forward storytelling...) and building cycles of action learning or action research to continually strengthen or transform these approaches.”* (Reeler).

Variations exist in terms of the degree of detail and terminology. Organisations may have a short narrative and a range of visual ways to present what they do and why. From the entrepreneurial context, Jan Brouwers comments: “I have heard entrepreneurs telling that it seems to resonate with what they call their ‘business case’. A convincing business case attracts investors as the business case provides a compelling story what changes are foreseen, with whom, how, in which timeframe and what resources are needed. Business people also add in their business case reasoning or motivation (what we call ‘assumptions’) about why they think ‘it will work’. Others speak about ‘foreward story telling’. A story about the initiative which helps to think about the abstract concept of “context” and how project partners think about relevant issues and other actors that might affect the project or will be affected by it.

2. Non-Negotiables in a ToC: Context, Actors, Assumptions and Power

Clearly there is no commonly agreed definition of ToC or one way of going about its use (Brouwers). Yet most would agree on being explicit about the desired change (mission/goals/objectives), the methods to achieve change, and context analysis. But is this not often already common practice in many contexts? Where do we believe ToC must distinguish itself in terms of the quality of thought?

Rochna (Hivos Central America) considers three elements essential to any ToC. First, a solid context analysis that includes a wider explanation beyond what one wants to change. Second, clarity about what who will promote the change process, who will contribute, who needs to be influenced and who will benefit; and, third, the key strategic activities.

In these choices, we make assumptions.

Hence, it is critical is clarity about *our collective assumptions about the nature of social problems and how change will come about*. Srilatha Batliwala reminded us of ‘structural analysis’ – “an analysis of the social problem you are addressing or seeking to change, and of the various force

I wonder if in fact, we should not call it a "Theory" of change so much as "Hypotheses" about change....
(Batliwala)

fields operating upon it, acting both for and against the change.” Doing this ‘provides us with the starting point and the material for in-depth strategic thinking: it offers clarity and a shared basis for our action, it gives focus and direction to the process of analysing the ‘ecosystem’ and visualising the desired change process, and it challenges us to look critically at our role in that process, in relation to what others do”. (Marjan van Es)

Power and politics are central to social problems. So a ToC should reflect values, including political views. These inform strategic choices. At Oxfam America, a strong focus of the context analysis is on power analysis. According to Clark, this often translates to a focus on power asymmetries and a simplified view of the solution to these, creating a risk that there is ‘limited emphasis on how these actors interact and influence each other, or how our activities will result in a change in these perceptions’.

Relationships and who we decide to work with or push against is a critical choice within a ToC process. Historically, the ‘comfortable’ relationships are hard to relinquish and new ones difficult to foster. Many power relations that have historically framed how social and political actors relate to each other are based on exclusion or are strongly self-interest based.

3. Theory – what does this mean?

We have all been influenced from many different sources to believe a set of ideas about how change happen and should happen. These are the ‘theories’ that we carry with us – consciously or unconsciously.

The word ‘theory’ is an uncomfortable one for many, often associated with abstract academic ideas with little relevance for daily work. Even if we think we are ignoring this entirely, we still use theories every day to influence our choices and actions, often unconsciously. We don’t think twice about switching on lights (physics) or spending time with our friends because it makes us feel connected (psychology).

The theories in use by organisations are usually a mix of ‘tested’ knowledge that comes from research and study, with reflections from personal experiences. For Singh, they are: “a combination of belief, vision and principles that guide actions across different operational/implementational contexts; a combination of conceptual, political and methodological frameworks”. As Rochna says: ‘it is the set of knowledge that people manages to decide on how to better intervene a given reality they want to change.’ But organisations can be sloppy about their theory, simply telling ‘a story which talks about what a better world would look like but doesn’t provide any insights on how to get there’ (Clark).

It does not matter whether our theories are read in books, the result of exhilarating or tough experiences, or beliefs handed on to us from family or colleagues. What occurs during a ToC process is making explicit “which sense-making frameworks we choose and use” (Retolaza/Rozo). And this can mean “unlearning what we have been socialised to believe to be true” (ibid).

Doug Reeler believes that the growth in theorising from practice (see discussion topic 1 above) is due to more sovereign and powerful social movements, alliances and federations of civil society organisations. He says: “The challenge for donors, academics, policy makers and second level practitioners (like CDRA) is to catch up and find roles that support theory and practice where the action is, to strengthen the thinking processes of practitioners and leaders on the ground.”

4. Whose ToC is it really?

A ToC is far from neutral. It is the product of the thinking and (power) relationships of those involved in shaping it. Assuming that it is necessary, for content and political reasons, that many voices and interests are heard and genuinely considered when making and monitoring our ToC, another question arises. Is the ToC that organisations wave around one produced by few or by many? Whose interests are considered (only the ones of the powerless/like minded or also the ones from the powerful/non-like minded)? What happened when different assumptions about change processes were raised? An organisation can have a formal ToC but that doesn't mean that all the people working in it will necessarily fully understand it, share it, and/or practice it.

Srilatha Batliwala shares that in her organisation, AWID, the process of developing their theory of change coincides with the strategic planning cycles (once every five years). It is a highly participatory process, including not only staff, but also key stakeholders like members of the organisation. The result is a shared articulation of 'what we do, WHY WE DO IT, our values, and what we hope to achieve (<http://www.awid.org/About-AWID/Who-We-Are>)".

Rochna's shares who she thinks should be involved: "Those keen to see change should be involved. The end beneficiaries, those who may ask for and implement change, or only those who ask for change, depends on the degree of marginalisation and disempowerment. In general, I feel that ToC is able to involve change agents... [constructing a ToC] based on lived experiences".

Including more perspectives may be used as a way of expanding the universe of interests, perspectives, bodies of knowledge, desires, proposals that need to be incorporated in the ToC thinking of our organisations and change processes. To what extent is this possible and feasible? What are the implications of more broadly carried ToC processes? And what are the implications of not bringing in other voices and interests in earlier stages of the ToC making and monitoring?

In large organisations, ToCs are elaborated and specified at different levels. For example, van Es says that Hivos specifies a ToC "for different areas of work (human rights, gender, economic development, media, culture, etc.) and for specific programmes in specific contexts. That process can be expected to refine, enrich *and* question the 'general' [organisational] ToC, as the 'theory' will be confronted with different realities and views of different stakeholders." This means that within one organisation multiple ToCs can and do exist with different emphases.

Jan Brouwers relates the question of who is involved to what it can deliver: "If this process is shared between trustees, project personnel, funders and other stakeholders, this can result in more appropriate shared expectations and more realistic planning. ToC practitioners that I met stated that the ToC formulation exercise can be an ideal opportunity to get stakeholders really involved in your work."

5. Balancing costs and benefits of a ToC process

The ToC initiative is, itself, a set of thoughts about how an organisation can improve its work. We seem to be assuming that ToC thinking seems to be a better alternative to linear planning logics for understanding and operate in the complex social change processes in which we are engaged. One assumption is that costs of spending time mapping out a ToC will be amply compensated by the benefits – i.e. that it will be well worthwhile. A ToC process seems to be time-consuming and specific skills. Is this a cost or a smart investment – that will pay itself back later during implementation?

Benefits. Discussions indicated that the benefits are still seen more as potential than confirmed. Singh and Rochna mention that ToC thinking provides concepts, politics and methods that make it

more applicable to complex social-political changes and social activism than more linear approaches (such as logframe) do. Secondly, the advantages for strategy definition are mentioned. Clark and Chambille value the value of ToC to making tough strategic decisions, because, Clark says, it assists in 'finding our leverage points to ensure the best investment of our limited financial and human resources'. Singh adds two related advantages compared to the current approach and practice of corporate strategy. Having an explicit ToC allows us to check whether failure, if any, was due to the fundamental theory or due to operational and implementation failure. Also, 'the process of developing theory of change is much more unifying and motivating than corporate and managerialist strategy development'.

Costs and limitations need to be considered. ToC, with its attention for thorough analysis, is time-consuming and requires capacity strengthening (Singh and Rochna). However Rochna thinks these costs are worth the investment in terms of (better) achieving changes, partly because a ToC process integrates planning and implementation. It is not an additional process. Chambille fears that given that ToC is mostly used in the context of seeking external funding, this will negatively affect the quality of the process and its results. Clark also points to the risk that ToC is not considered in relation to projects, as there is a tension with institutional priorities of demonstrating impact and demonstrating our ability to show credible impact. She hopes to make the link by providing guidelines as to how individual projects contribute to their ToC and generate evidence that supports their claims to impact.

6. Recognising good quality ToC

ToC is an organisational (and individual) practice that is essentially a thought process of a certain quality and specific content. But the issue is that everyone seems to do ToC 'a bit' and all contributors to this discussion considered practice was weak. So what then defines 'good quality'?

An organisation can assess its own current practice in terms of several criteria or an external set of criteria, such as what is emerging from the Hivos ToC Initiative. Doug Reeler says that what constitutes good quality will vary per organisation: "a pioneering organisation requires a very different quality of thinking (neither higher nor lower) than a more conscious one in its 'rational' phase". Irrespective of which criteria are used, Reeler suggests the following questions are good to take stock of value and quality:

- "How useful has it been compared to what they were doing a year ago?
- In what way has it helped them to more consciously link their work with their purpose?
- Has it enabled progressively more people to become engaged in thinking strategically?
- What has hindered or helped?"

From the discussion, the following criteria related to ToC content and process were identified as aspects of quality:

- comprehensiveness (see Figure 1 in starting document, i.e. context, values, strategy, actors);
- quality of power analysis about 'how change happens' and the forces at play that help hinder;
- underlying assumptions and values are explicit
- participation of different groups of people in ToC development; and
- active and dynamic use in organisation to guide the work.

