

## Capacities for doing, and thinking, ToC in organisations

*Discussion Paper Theory of Change Hivos, third e-discussion*

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### 1. Out of discussion thus far – claims we might make about ToC

In the paper reflecting on the outcome of the second e-discussion – “*Rigid plan or vague vision: How precise does a ToC needs to be?*” Seerp Wigboldus and Jan Brouwers asked:

*“How to embed the ToC articulation process in the organisation in such a way that it does not become an externally driven process? How to stimulate strategic thinking through it?”<sup>1</sup>*

Elsewhere, they identify an emerging distinction between those broad, exploratory ToC processes that open a whole field of thinking and more narrow, operational-like processes which might be called a ‘theory of action.’

Clearly external service providers and partners can prompt thinking about ToC (both narrowly and broadly understood). They can even require evidence of such thinking as a condition for future cooperation. However, it is very clear that unless the thinking – both broad and specific; both conceptual and operational - is happening as a matter of course inside of that organisation or initiative, we cannot claim to have had much success in ‘embedding’ or prompting inclusion of ToC in people’s work.

Put another way, unless there is active *thinking*, about change and ongoing *articulation* of the outcomes of that thinking in accessible and comprehensible ways, no amount of theories, or frameworks, or logic models will actually change anything at all! Further, such embedded thinking, by definition, includes changed behaviours, ways of doing and, ultimately, changed mindsets. Ultimately it involves a fluid and constantly evolving relationship between thinking and action<sup>2</sup>.

### 2. Introducing the third discussion

In the second e-discussion we took these thoughts - that ToC thinking is an activity itself and that it includes different levels of focus, depending on where in the strategy process it is happening - as a place of departure for our next round.

We asked what practical experiences exist in the different regions in the South and in Europe with respect to how to develop capacity in working with ToC.

### 3. Where is ToC capacity development happening?

In this discussion, we imagined we might receive accounts from a range of interventions. These could include –

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<sup>1</sup> Seerp Wigboldus and Jan Brouwers, ‘Discussion paper Theory of Change Hivos second E-Discussion’, 22 December 2011

<sup>2</sup> ToC active thinking (or thinking and action) is not only about cognitive, epistemological thinking but also about changing behaviours and striving for more coherence between our “new” thinking (whatever that may be and whatever expected results it generates) and the “new” behaviour that should follow it (organisational or group practice). This is important when we look for deeper articulation between changes happening outside the organisation (the external world) and the changes needed within our own organisation and/or ourselves so to respond to and support effectively those “positive” changes we want to contribute to happen. In many ways it involves going about one’s work with an action-learning attitude. This is also why iterative monitoring becomes so important.

- processes and interventions that intentionally sought to develop the capacity of another (or group of others) to work with ToC, perhaps a training course using material that explicitly works with “ToC” and “ToC thinking”.
- processes and interventions that intentionally sought to develop the capacity of another (or group of others) to work conceptually, or theoretically. These might have involved the introduction of material that was itself conceptual or they might have used a method that surfaced existing theory within the system.
- evaluations in which the identification and articulation of programme theory was an integral part of the evaluation process and formed the basis for subsequent evaluation research.
- strategic planning processes in which the conceptual, or theoretical underpinnings of the plan are elaborated on and articulated as the foundation of the process, and a key outcome.
- establishment of monitoring mechanisms that seek to link thinking and action.
- organisation development processes in which the ToC (explicit or implicit) underlying much of the organisation’s culture and functioning in a wider context is revealed, articulated and brought to greater consciousness.
- research processes in which respondents are supported to see the theory within the accounts and data that they are providing to the researcher.
- participatory community based engagements in which people are supported to articulate how they see change and relationships between local events as well as the relationship between broader, contextual events and local events.
- training processes about project planning, management or any kind of training process that deliberately introduces the notion about theorising about change and how it is understood to happen.
- one-on-one conversations, meetings and exchanges in which thinking about change as a conscious activity is worked with: the meta-activity. “Not just what is your plan?” but “what does your plan reveal about how you understand change, and what you expect to see?”
- accounts from leaders, managers and team leaders – those who from inside of initiatives are actively leading conceptually.
- accounts from external service providers - facilitators, consultants, trainers, researchers
- accounts from those who work in partnership as capacity builders and partners, for example donors
- personal reflections on how one works with ToC in one’s own practice.

The list appears endless. “ToC” and “ToC thinking” is a sensibility that cuts across the whole of existing social change, development and organisational practice.

Part of the job of this ToC learning process is to try to surface at what points in the organisational and/or strategic process ToC thinking is central, and to hear the wide variety of ways in which it emerges.

Out of our own experience of doing this work, we are aware that such attention to the ToC process brings us face to face with the underlying values in our work (conscious and unconscious, explicit and implicit), and also the assumptions that are being made, often assumptions that we are completely unaware of. For this reason, working with ToC can be a very challenging, sometimes painful process. Far from being a 'cool' intellectual exercise, working with ToC brings us to the heart of our thinking – and face to face with our actions and their consequences.

#### 4. **What is the practitioner thinking and doing?**

The key variable in our quest for these accounts is not the location, or the precise method, or the point-in-time at which the practitioner engages, or the practitioner's relationship to the system but rather, we ask – *was the practitioner's own work intentional with respect to developing conceptual/theoretical capacity?* In this third e-discussion we were interested in hearing accounts of these experiences – out of that thinking, *what did you do?* And of course, we are as interested in responses to our next question – *“And then, what was the effect?”*

We imagined that we will reveal as much about our own theories of change, and how these inform our practice as we will of the conditions under which we work and the methods that are best suited to these. We imagined a series of accounts that give insight into both the practitioner-writer's own thinking and action, their reading of the world in which they work and their account of the thinking of those with whom they work. Accounts that are both reflexive and reflective<sup>3</sup>.

#### 5. **More specifically**

Without prescribing a format for contributions, we thought the following questions might be useful prompts to thinking:

- whose capacity was developing – and what was their relationship to others in their systems? Were they best placed to benefit from this kind of work? Was it based on their explicitly made needs / demands or did it come from another organisation, for example a donor, alliance partner, head office?
- what work around ToC thinking was specifically undertaken, and what was the thinking – including assumptions and values – behind this?
- what new, or different, results did the enhanced capacity make possible?
- what effects did this thinking have on the internal organisational system(s)?
- what essential capacities are required for good quality ToC practice, and by whom?
- what CD methods proved to be effective and why? Try to describe the internal and external factors which had an effect.

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<sup>3</sup> *Reflexivity* has to do with reflecting on one's own inner world (identity, mindsets, emotions, who am I, the way past experiences affect my present self, how what I do/think affects me and what I do) and *reflectivity* has to do with reflection about the external world (for example, social change processes, context analysis, institutional analysis).

## 6. Contributions

We received four contributions. **Paola Rozo** summarised a key learning of our ToC experiences so far. *“Facilitation should start with acknowledging what is already present as ToC practice and ToC thinking capacity. Often there is already a lot of tacit and implicit thinking about change and how the team, organisation or network thinks about their own role in change processes. Recognising and acknowledging this capacity is a precondition for a facilitator to engage in a ToC facilitation process.”*

*“Attention to the present ToC capacities surfaces values and assumptions in the team. We all have underlying values in our work, conscious or unconscious. In the process of relating to values and assumptions we arrive at the core topics of ToC that will guide the next steps. Sometimes people start to formulate assumptions they were unaware of before. Assumptions about what first outcomes actions will have. And how these first outcomes will eventually turn into outcomes at a later stage. But also assumptions about what other actors will do or not do. Or how factors like climate change or political (in)stability around them will affect the change process.”*

**Rosalind Eyben** shared her experiences in working with organisations on ToC. She finds herself struggling with two separate sets of ideas in the past years dealing with ToC. The first was about process and relational approaches to change. The second was to develop further work on helping people surface their tacit theories of change. Rosalind started to call these theories of how history happens. She argues that such theories are not only culturally and historically derived but that values also play a part in those we choose to apply and those we choose to ignore.

On the basis of these ideas she introduced change thinking into teaching as well as much of the work she does with development organisations. Her objective is to help people surface their tacit theories and through games and exercises discover how their theoretical assumptions may not be shared by colleagues let alone by development partners. She has run workshops specifically on ToC for international NGOs using their own programme and project documentation to help them think through their assumptions in relation to both favoured theories of how history happens and complexity/process. A struggle over the years has been how to incorporate concepts of power into helping people think about change with key questions like whose theories count and the effects of ignoring muted voices.

*“One of the most interesting aspects of this work is enabling people to get to grips with “theory” that for many practitioners is quite scary until they come to appreciate it is just about explanation and generalisation and that reflexivity is key to handling theory so that it is tool for thinking and acting rather than let yourself become its servant blinded to other people realities.”*

To sum up, in working with development organisations Rosalind encourages to think about how:

- Choosing one theory over another is not a purely technical matter of which theory fits the context, rather, any model of societal change is political and value-laden;

- Power and position shape our ideas about change. NGOs, the communities they work in and their partners may all have different theories of how history happens that influence strategies for action;
- Theories are always partial. There is not a ToC that is universally applicable and in each and any context dialogue is the basis for choosing the possible different ways forward. There is a good case for partners to agree to use two or more different programme theories in relation to political contingency and the positionality of those involved. Rosalind is dubious about any organisation having a single ToC that applies in all and every circumstance.

**Marjan van Es** confirmed that the last three bullets are very to-the-point and relevant for the Hivos ToC learning process. Hivos recently started work to make the Hivos theory(ies) of change underlying some of its main programmes more explicit and struggled with the level of abstraction as those programmes take shape and are realised in very different contexts. So the last point that theories are always partial and no single ToC applies in all situations was felt. At the same time a broadly (and deeply) shared understanding of Hivos' view to change as a political process and the relation with our humanist values can help to make sharper strategic choices in those specific contexts.

Marjan also recognised the experience of practitioners being a bit wary of 'theory' but at the same time she sees *“a great eagerness of people in Hivos to discuss and understand personal and organisational assumptions we have about how change happens and how we try to contribute to it. Probably we are in the stage of surfacing tacit theories of change, as Rosalind call it, at different levels of the organisation and revisiting and unpacking elements of Hivos thinking.”*

Also **Srilatha Batliwala** agrees with this point: the impossibility of any single theory to hold all the complexity of our change work within it. And she also wondered what the politics is behind the drive to have one over-arching and compelling theory, rather than the different variations that Rosalind proposed may be necessary or even essential for political survival.

Srilatha was struck by the role expected from a ToC – *“that it should inform and guide action, and that somehow our strategies and actions will be more effective and impactful as a result. Yes, maybe - we are all for sensible planning and rationally-thought-out action; but isn't it also true that in any kind of social change work, the most active principle is unpredictability? I believe the saying was “The best laid plans of mice and men”? At one time, I used to think this factor was more potent in Southern contexts, but after watching the fall of Wall Street and the financial crisis of 2008, and the sweep of conservatism across Western Europe, I've changed my mind. So even the most elaborately framed ToC cannot foresee or foretell all scenarios”.*

Srilatha was thinking back to the *“many powerful, game-changing movements that have transformed our world and our ways of thinking began not with a ToC, but with passionate outrage or massive uprisings that had little clear sense, at least at the outset, of how they would achieve change. They just felt that they had reached a limit, that enough was enough, and they took some intuitive action without any clear sense of causality - of what would lead to what. And it is these spontaneous movement histories and experiences that today inform many of our ToCs, even though we may not*

*recognize this provenance*". Developing a good ToC for organizations like Hivos should include the possibility for spontaneity, for the unknowable, for the unpredictable. It must also allow for multiple co-existing theories that can be applied in different scenarios, thus admitting that development or change is never on a single pathway or trajectory.