Review of the use of â??Theory of Changeâ?? in International Development

Description

Tweet

By Isabel Vogel. Funded by DFID, 2012

Review of the use of â??Theory of Changeâ?? in international development (full report)
Review of the use of â??Theory of Changeâ?? in international development (summary)
Appendix 3: Examples of Theories of Change

1. Executive Summary
â??Theory of changeâ?? is an outcomes-based approach which applies critical thinking to the design, implementation and evaluation of initiatives and programmes intended to support change in their contexts. It is being increasingly used in international development by a wide range of governmental, bilateral and multi-lateral development agencies, civil society organisations, international non-governmental organisations and research programmes intended to support development outcomes. The UKâ??s Department for International Development (DFID) commissioned this review of how theory of change is being used in order to learn from this growing area of practice. DFID has been working formally with theory of change in in its programming since 2010. The purpose was to identify areas of consensus, debate and innovation in order to inform a more consistent approach within DFID.

Key messages from the review
â??Theory of changeâ?? as an approach is not new. It has much in common with other approaches. Many people consider that the current interest in theory of change reflects a need to re-emphasise the deeper analysis that the original Logical Framework Analysis was designed to elicit but that has recently become a more superficial contractual exercise.

1. Theory of change requires both logical thinking and deeper critical reflection Theory of change draws its methodological credentials from a long-standing area of evaluation which deals with programme theories. It is also informed by an equally long-standing development practice â?? reflective practice for empowerment and social change. The presence of both traditions in the current evolution means that a wide range of development organisations, from grass-roots initiatives in developing countries to donor agencies, have found it an accessible and useful approach. Some people view it as a tool and methodology to map out the logical sequence of an initiative from inputs to outcomes. Other people see it as a deeper reflective process and dialogue amongst colleagues and stakeholders, reflecting on the values, worldviews and philosophies of change that make more explicit peopleâ??s underlying assumptions of how and why change might happen as an outcome of the initiative. Theory of change is at its best when it combines both approaches. The mapping of the logical sequence is strengthened by critical thinking about the contextual conditions that influence the programme, the motivations and contributions of stakeholders and other actors, and the different interpretations (assumptions) about how and why that sequence of change might come about.

2. Consensus exists on the basic elements of theory of change The review found that there is no single definition of what theory of change is and no set methodology. People work with theory of change

flexibly, according to their needs.
Rick Davies, a well-known evaluation specialist, defines a theory of change simply as: â??The description of a sequence of events that is expected to lead to a particular desired outcome.â?? Patricia Rogers, another well-known evaluation expert puts it like this: â??Every programme is packed with beliefs, assumptions and hypotheses about how change happens â?? about the way humans work, or organisations, or political systems, or eco-systems. Theory of change is about articulating these many underlying assumptions about how change will happen in a programme.â?? There is consensus on the basic elements that make up the theory of change approach. As a minimum, theory of change is considered to encompass a discussion of the following elements:
â?¢ Context for the initiative , including social, political and environmental conditions, the current state of the problem the project is seeking to influence and other actors able to influence change
â?¢ Long-term change that the initiative seeks to support and for whose ultimate benefit
â?¢ Process/sequence of change anticipated to lead to the desired long-term outcome
â?¢ Assumptions about how these changes might happen, as a check on whether the activities and outputs are appropriate for influencing change in the desired direction in this context.
â?¢ Diagram and narrative summary that captures the outcomes of the discussion.

3. Theory of change is best kept flexible, not prescribed
The strong message from the contributors to this review is that theory of change is best seen as theory of change thinking, a flexible approach to think through these fundamental issues. It is both a process and a product.
Rather than a prescribed methodology, theory of change is most effective when applied through pre-existing processes, to support critical thinking throughout the programme cycle.
If donors and funders are keen to encourage the benefits of theory of change thinking in programmes, then mandatory requirements, products or a prescribed process as conditions of funding are best avoided.Contributors to the review felt strongly that, if prescribed, theory of change would quickly become a compliance exercise and lose much of its value.

4. Theory of change inspires and supports innovation and improvement in programmes
The central idea in theory of change thinking is making assumptions explicit. Assumptions act as â??rules of thumbâ?? that influence our choices, as individuals and organisations. Assumptions reflect deeply held values, norms and ideological perspectives. These inform the design and implementation of programmes. Making assumptions explicit, especially seemingly obvious ones, allows them to be checked, debated and enriched to strengthen programmes. By activating critical reflection, theory of changeâ??s real potential is seen as supporting programmesâ?? innovation and adaptation in response to dynamic contexts. As it encourages on-going questioning of what might influence change in the context and drawing on evidence and learning during implementation, theory of change thinking can inspire improvements in programmes, moving beyond technocratic responses towards more realistic and feasible interventions that are responsive to dynamic contexts.

5. Working with theory of change requires performance management approaches to accommodate uncertainty and flexibility Theory of change is not a magic bullet. It can be used as poorly or as well as any other approach. It is
challenging to work with because it requires a commitment to take a reflective, critical and honest approach to answer difficult questions about how our efforts might influence change, given the political realities, uncertainties and complexities that surround all development initiatives. To be applied well, theory of change demands an institutional willingness to be realistic and flexible in programming

responses, both at the design stage and, more importantly, in implementation and performance management. To support a better fit between programme and context, it may be that chosen interventions are not technically the most efficient or effective, but are justified as the most appropriate for influencing change within the social, political and environmental realities of their particular context. Contributors acknowledged that a realistic, adaptive approach should be recognised as good programme practice, but the realities of funding and performance management systems in the international development sector make this very challenging to achieve at all levels.

Review findings

The findings of the review are summarised below:

â?¢ Theory of change is both a process and a product. It should be seen as an on-going process of discussion-based analysis and learning that produces powerful insights to support programme design, strategy, implementation, evaluation and impact assessment, communicated through diagrams and narratives which are updated at regular intervals.
â?¢ The quality of a theory of change process rests on â??making assumptions explicitâ?? and making strategic thinking realistic and transparent. Practical experience highlights that this is not straightforward to do, as these tap into deeper beliefs, values, worldviews, operational â??rules of thumbâ?? and analytical lenses that all individuals in development bring to their work. It takes time and dialogue to be able to challenge assumptions. Power relations, both in the programmeâ??s context and within organisations, limit the ability to challenge established ways of working.
â?¢ The time and resource needed to work effectively with theory of change needs to be taken seriously. Staff in donor agencies, country programmes and civil society organisations are all under time pressures â?? pragmatic approaches can get theory of change habits seeded, but institutional and funding support for theory of change processes is needed to get the benefits in terms of more robust log-frames, results frameworks and better implementation of programmes.
â?¢ Working with theory of change thinking can be challenging but it can create a strong organising framework to improve programme design, implementation, evaluation and learning if some of the following enabling factors can be achieved:
o People are able to discuss and exchange their personal, organisational and analytical assumptions with an open, learning approach.Theory of change thinking is used to explain rationales and how things are intended to work, but also to explore new possibilities through critical thinking, discussion and challenging of dominant narratives for the benefit of stakeholders.
o Critical thinking is cross-checked with evidence from research (qualitative and quantitative) and wider learning that brings other analytical perspectives, referenced to stakeholdersâ??, partnersâ?? and beneficiariesâ?? contextual knowledge.
o A number of theories of change are identified as relevant â??pathwaysâ?? to impact for any given initiative, rather than a single pathway, with acknowledgement of the non-linearity and emergent nature of these.
o Documented theories of change and visual diagrams are acknowledged as subjective interpretations of the change process and used as evolving â??organising frameworksâ?? to guide implementation and evaluation, not rigid predictions or prescriptions for change.
o Theory of change frameworks and visuals are used to support a more dynamic exchange between donors, funders, grantees, development partners, programmes and communities, to help open up new areas and challenge received wisdoms.
o Donors, funders and grant-makers are able to find ways to support justified adaptation and refocusing of programme strategies during implementation, while there is time to deliver improvements to

stakeholders and communities.

Scope of the review
This review was commissioned by DFID Evaluation Division. The reviewer conducted 40 interviews with staff from 25 development organisations, including 9 donor agencies, 7 international NGOS and 9 research and training organisations (see Appendix 3 for a list of people and organisations). Organisations were identified through an email survey, self-identification and recommendations. There was also a light-touch review of published and grey literature on theory of change, in particular to identify guidance and tools available. The draft report was shared at a DFID workshop with external stakeholders on 2nd May 2012, by email and through a blog posting for wider discussion. Comments and feedback have been incorporated into the final version of the report.

Structure of the report
The review report is structured around nine topics that were identified through scoping interviews with key DFID staff and partners. The review focused on the practical aspects of working with theory of change in programmes.
To assist the reader, for each topic, key points are highlighted at the start of each section, the findings illustrated with examples. Practical suggestions are highlighted. Box Examples are also provided to illustrate peopleâ??s experience, from donors to implementing agencies and projects. The appendices contain more examples of documented theories of change and also guidelines and tools to support people working with theory of change.
Section 2: Who is using theory of change in international development?
Section 3: What is â??theory of change thinkingâ?? in practice?
Section 4: Why are the â??assumptionsâ?? so important in theory of change?
Section 5: What makes a good quality theory of change process and product?
Section 6: Representing theories of change
Section 7: Using evidence to support a theory of change process?
Section 8: Using theory of change thinking to support evaluation, impact assessment and learning
Section 9: Using theory of change to address complex aspects of programmes and emergent strategy
Section 10: Embedding on-going theory of change thinking and learning
Section 11: Conclusions

Category

1. Uncategorized

Tags

1. DFID
2. Theory of Change

Date

18/10/2026
Date Created
31/08/2012
Author
admin