Theory of Change thinking applied in MSPs

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Seminar Report

The Centre for Development Innovation, part of Wageningen UR (Wageningen University & Research centre) works on processes of innovation and change in the areas of secure and healthy food, adaptive agriculture, sustainable markets and ecosystem governance. It is an interdisciplinary and internationally focused unit of Wageningen UR within the Social Sciences Group.

Through facilitating innovation, brokering knowledge and supporting capacity development, our group of 60 staff help to link Wageningen UR's expertise to the global challenges of sustainable and equitable development. The Centre for Development Innovation works to inspire new forms of learning and collaboration between citizens, governments, businesses, NGOs and the scientific community.

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Innovation & Change

Ecosystem Governance

Adaptive Agriculture

Sustainable Markets

Secure & Healthy Food

Theory of Change Thinking applied in MSPs

On Wednesday 19 September 2012, Centre for Development Innovation, Wageningen UR together with SNV organised a full day seminar to discuss the application of the now widely used Theory of Change (ToC) thinking in multi-stakeholder processes (MSPs).

The seminar was part of the international 3-week course 'Facilitating multi stakeholder processes and social learning' organised by the Centre for Development Innovation, which was attended by more than 80 professionals from all over the world.

The seminar looked at the current use and application of ToC thinking in multi stakeholder processes. Practice of MSPs has evolved strongly over the last 10 years towards far-reaching ambitions of improving dynamics in multi-actor systems. But what kind of change do we envision with our interventions? What are the underlying assumptions? And what change do we really accomplish?

The objectives of the day were:

- To share knowledge about ToC;
- To improve understanding of the use of ToC;
- To share experiences from the field;
- To provide a learning opportunity;
- To expand our networks.

Two speakers shared their experience and provided the participants with reflections from the field food for thought:

- Isabel Vogel did a major review of the ToC practice of DFID. DFID has been working formally with theory of change in its programming since 2010. Isabel Vogel looked at the application of ToC in programmes by civil society organisations, implementing agencies and bilateral donors, and shared the main findings of the review;
- Jan Ubels from SNV shared latest thinking and challenges from his organisations' ample experience with intervening in multi-actor systems. Jan Ubels drew from the rich experience of SNV in agriculture, WASH and renewable energy to discuss key challenges and possible solutions in using MSPs for systemic change.

Three key questions guided the discussions during the seminar:

- What are the current use and application of ToC thinking?
- How can ToC thinking be a useful lens to reflect?
- How can ToC thinking help to make assumptions more explicit and actions more successful?

These questions, related to various topics, were discussed in parallel working groups:

- Balancing uniformity and diversity in ToCs;
- Practicing visuals of ToC;
- Articulating assumptions that underpin MSP ToC;
- Embedding the use of ToC into design, monitoring and evaluation of MSP practice;
- Capacities for doing and thinking ToC.

Each of the practical sessions formulated a number of statements as input for the plenary session at the end of the day.

Keynote Speaker Isabel Vogel

The first keynote speaker was Isabel Vogel, an independent consultant supporting organisations to achieve their social goals through learning, evidence and innovation. Isabel Vogel did a recent study for the UK DFID (Department for International Development) and their use of the Theory of Change. The DFID commissioned the review to learn from practice, inform a more consistent internal approach and share learning across international development.

In her presentation Isabel Vogel aimed to answer the following questions:
- How do people use Theory of Change?
- How can we make our initiatives more effective?

ToC helps to build a connection between what you want to achieve and achieving it. Theory of Change thinking challenges people to think about the elements that create change, as well as to make their underlying assumptions explicit. Working with ToC is not easy, as it requires critical reflection on current practice. Theory of Change is holistic, realistic and has emphasis on influencing and supporting change. It is a non-linear model focusing on the process and allowing for reflexivity and adaptation. Therefore it can function as a framework for supporting multi stakeholder processes.

Challenges
There are a few challenges when working with Theory of Change. There can be radically different views possible on change. How change happens and how to make these ideas and assumptions explicit is not so easy. Another challenge is to to keep thinking and reflecting on ToC.. Isabel Vogel defined three challenges.

Challenge 1: Theory of Change thinking requires logical thinking and critical reflection
ToC requires understanding the complexity of a situation including the individual, the social and political realm. Theory of Change thinking should combine logical thinking with critical reflection to explore different views on change.

Tips to combine logical thinking with reflecting and taking the complex situation into account:

- Group discussions: participatory, involving stakeholders;
- Long term change is clear, specific and plausible: who's involved, what, when, where, and why;
- Assumptions need to be expressed and explored;

- Visualization representation should be understandable for outsiders;
- Enrich the reflections with external learning (learning from outside factors);
- Use and review the ToC often;
- ToC requires time for ideas to be created.

Challenge 2: Making assumptions explicit. Why is it so hard?

Personal assumptions and wishes shape our behaviour and these influence interactions between the social and actual world. It is therefore important to make these implicit ideas explicit. Doing this is a challenge, because it requires changing one's view. When introducing new thinking or behavioural change it is likely to challenge the existing dominant view. Critical reflection will change the organisations and the stakeholder's way of thinking. Although it may be difficult it can be addressed and facilitated.

Tips to make assumptions explicit:
- Be clear about the purpose for ToC
- Anticipate focus and facilitation for assumptions
- Categorise the assumptions;
  o Look at the cause-effect of the assumptions;
  o Look at individual's paradigms and worldviews;
  o Look at the context of assumptions.
  o Look at the strategy and implementation
  o Look at the belief systems in society
- Select a few assumptions to work with

Challenge 3: Maintaining the Theory of Change way of thinking

The third challenge is to maintain the newly acquired way of thinking. As the ToC is an on-going learning process and fosters continuous dialogue it is not like a one-off proposal stage process. Theory of change thinking needs to be approached from a learning, not a compliance approach. Imposing or creating a mandatory and prescribed process and product will surely lead to discontinuation and resistance to ToC.

Tips to maintain the Theory of Change way of thinking:
- Building more flexible systems and culture of adaptive management;
- Maintain real learning and avoid bureaucracy;
- Staffing and resourcing of learning in programmes;
- Don't make it an obligatory process but a learning process;

Conclusion

Some of the enabling factors for ToC are to create space for interaction, to support wider learning by all involved, to emphasise the nonlinearity in the process, to allow for uncertainty and emergence of issues, to acknowledge subjective limits of ToC, use ToC visuals to support dialogues and to open up new areas and innovate, and encourage donors, funders and grant-makers to make justified adaptations during the implementation.

Although the introduction of ToC can be challenging, it gets easier with practice. ToC puts things in a holistic perspective and involvement of stakeholders supports stronger programme design and implementation. ToC should be facilitated to share different ideas, to become inspired, to innovate, and to improve.
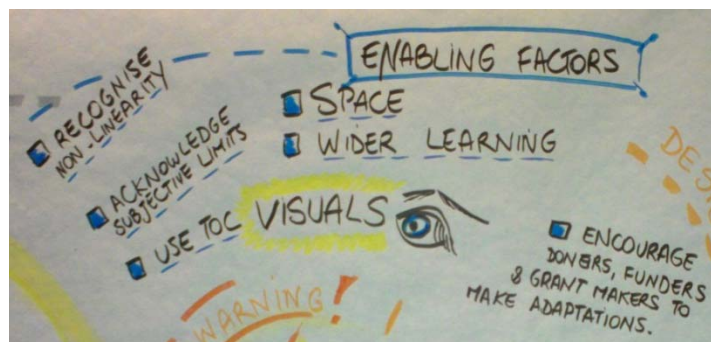
Keynote Speaker Jan Ubels

Jan Ubels is the Senior Strategy Advisor at SNV (Netherlands Development Organization) and has extensive experience with MSPs in agriculture, water sanitation and renewable energy. In his key note Ubels is positive about ToC for non-profit businesses. He stated that NGOs play an important role in innovations for development, which are then followed by the market. ToC is thought to be important for these innovations.

Jan Ubels urges not to think in terms of an ideal ToC for each development programme. It is about the ability to see, combine and effectively use different change dynamics. Ubels used the 'five change paradigms' model of Leon de Caluwe and Hans Vermaak which represent five ways of thinking about change, each represented by a different colour (see figure 1). Each colour has its assumptions about human behaviour and how behavioural change can be stimulated. This model could be helpful to uncover assumptions and paradigms that inform ToC.

Figure 1: Five colours of change

	Core focuses and strategies	Pitfalls
Yellow	Interests, negotiation, consensus building, dealing with conflict	Tough lengthy processes, least common denominator
Blue	Facts, rational choices, planning, control	Ignoring external forces irrational dynamic hidden
Red	Motivation, entrepreneurship, providing incentives, enabling environment	Ignoring power issues, destructive competition
Green	Curiosity, learning, feedback and skills, open communication	Excluding no-one, content but lack of action
White	Evolution, self-steering, creating meaning, process facilitation	Superficial understanding, laissez-faire-chaos

This model can help to:

– Clarify communication, deal with misunderstandings;
– Characterise dominant paradigms in groups;
– Map possible strategies, choose/develop a fitting one;
– Reflect on assumptions, own competencies and limitations.

Different actors (government, NGOs, entrepreneurs) encompass different models of change. Any development intervention today is an effort to make a multi-actor system function at a new level of performance, effectiveness, sustainability, equity, learning, efficiency and accountability. Hence, any intervention is based in a model of change..
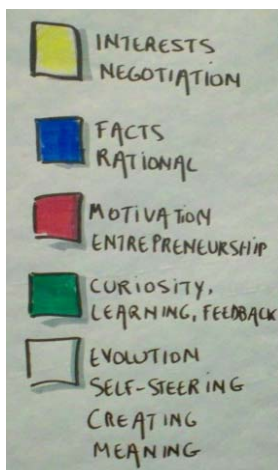
During the presentation a short movie was shown about a biogas installations-project at community level in Nepal in which SNV was involved. Even though ToC was not applied during that project, this example showcased how the five colours of change were present and therefore which assumptions and thinking were applied. For example, the project was led by a market driven approach (red). The financing was done the private sector (red). There was a carbon credits regulation (blue), and overall there was a lot of learning (green). SNV's role changed during the process from being very hands-on (yellow) to more facilitating (white). To answer the question 'how does change happen' and to construct a ToC it is important to note that each case is very different and hence to consider the context and the country carefully.

Some conclusions from the colour model connected to the ToC perspective:

– In every example there is a dominant model of change (a dominant colour). Here it is important to apply various layers and to view different perspectives in order to consider other models of change (rainbow of colours).
– A ToC will be different for each country or context and it is a major challenge to design it together with all actors.
– It is seen that matches are made between organisations embracing the same 'colours' and assuming the same change models. Advice is to be very honest about the 'coloured' tendencies and abilities of an organisation or an MSP.

Jan Ubels finalised with sharing a few lessons learnt about facilitation. Institutionalization can lead to a rigid and bureaucratic platform, because many ideas or processes get tackled before they can mature (this means that there is too much blue and yellow according to the colour model). Nonetheless, a ToC needs some kind of formalization. Learning spaces (green) are needed and special moments should be created for this. Examples are small think tank groups, set meetings (brown-bag meetings), workshops. Lastly one can mobilize neutral players, such as facilitators (white) to develop dynamics and capacity for change.

Further Reading

For further reading the following websites are suggested:

About Theory of Change:
http://www.hivos.net/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Themes/Theory-of-Change

About Multi Stakeholder Processes:
http://www.wageningenportals.nl/msp

Report Isabel Vogel on the DFID review:
http://www.dfid.gov.uk/r4d/Output/190843/Default.aspx

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