CDI and theory of change

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An increasing number of our staff have started to work with Theory of Change (ToC) over the last years. We like it as it helps our clients in making strategic choices and focuses on results. It has also strengthened our own capacity as facilitators as it brings a framework that allows for surfacing assumptions about change. These assumptions are critical in planning, monitoring and evaluation. ToC practice has emerged in many of our thematic areas and together with our partner Hivos, we have worked for three years on developing ToCs. As ToC is gaining ground, it also helps clients gain increased credibility amongst their partners, including funding agencies.

What is a Theory of Change?

We are often clear about **what** we want to achieve. Often though, we are doing poorly on **how** we think that change will come about. Most teams can quickly share the activities they are doing and the outputs these will deliver. We also often have a long term vision what the overall impact should be. But in between is a "missing middle" for many projects and programmes; what is the logic behind the intervention? ToC helps to make these change pathways, or causal relations in interventions, much more explicit. For us, ToC refers to the understanding an organisation, project, network or group of stakeholders has about how political, social, or economic change happens and its contribution to such a change process. ToC development is the process of explicating causal relations and creating understanding of changes. It also involves checking assumptions and reflecting continuously in ways that allow for adaptation of an intervention. In essence, a ToC is thus a product: the logic behind the project or programme, but also a process of understanding causal relations and the assumptions associated with these.

With Hivos we have worked three years on ToC. One result is a resource portal on ToC: www.hivos.net/toc This portal provides answers at tab *Resources* to the ten most frequently asked questions on ToC and a range of visualisations, examples and references.

The Centre for Development Innovation (CDI) is the knowledge broker of Wageningen University & Research centre (Wageningen UR). We have built an extensive international track record on issues such as food and nutrition security; sustainable markets; adaptive agriculture; ecosystem governance; conflict, disaster and reconstruction; and innovation and change. In our experience, only an integrated approach leads to sustainable change. Our staff have a unique combination of substantive knowledge, an international network and excellent process management qualities. In this issue brief we would like to share how we deal with Theory of Change and illustrate this with a number of examples.

Visualisation helps

A ToC can be represented visually, or as a narrative or a combination of both. Often both are needed. The visual representation allows for a summary that facilitates discussion and communication about what a project or organisation does. The narrative allows for in-depth discussion of power analysis, politics of change, needs and choices and actors involved.

Visualisation of a ToC helps people to see relations between actions and results. It helps in grasping a complex situation involving many players and the relations between changes. Interaction between people is stimulated as they share different experiences and points of view together if the visualisation is done in a participatory manner. The power of visualization is in drawing attention to that which needs attention.

ToC is basically about surfacing assumptions

One of the most eye-opening aspects of our ToC work with partners for participants is that of identifying assumptions. We all have assumptions about how change happens in the back of our minds.
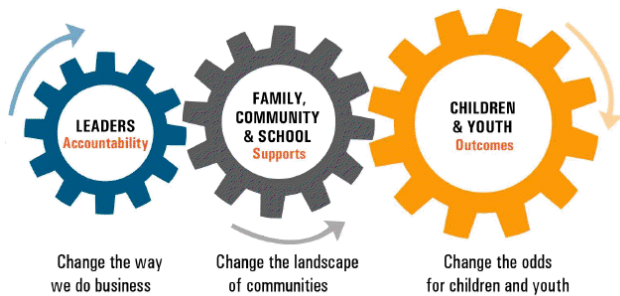
Example of a visualised ToC.

Helping each other to articulate implicit assumptions has helped a lot: understand why we choose for certain actions, insight in what works and why, or understand why things did not work, generate new strategies and actions, or pinpoint the most relevant information for outcome or impact reporting. In developing or reviewing a ToC, we also may come to understand why organisations in a certain partnership are not working well together: their assumptions differ.

We work with different types of assumptions

In the past we applied mainly one type of assumption in the logical framework: context assumptions on issues beyond our reach (no political revolution, stable climatic conditions, continuous economic growth). With ToC practice we add other types of assumptions like the causal links between outcomes at different levels such as "skills training will lead to improved employment". We look "into the arrow": why do we think that a set of inputs will over time result in an outcome? Another type of assumption is called "world view" assumptions about the higher level, for instance macro-economic drivers of change. An example is that some actors assume that open markets are a condition for long term positive economic impacts. Yet another type of assumption concerns dominant belief systems in the society you are working in; maybe there is a common belief that man and women should have different tasks and roles.

The ToC process facilitates discussions on differences in assumptions held by different individuals and groups. Clarifying assumptions has clearly helped in team building, but also supports more focused action amongst partners, and faster adaptation of strategies while progressing.

Examples of our ToC work in practice

We have applied ToC in a range of different sectors and domains. Value Chain Development is one area where we have assisted clients in applying ToC, for instance dairy value chains in Kenya or cocoa value chains in Ivory Coast. Another domain is action-research for agricultural development as an input for ToC. We also supported campaigning teams in thinking through their pathways of change and making it more focussed and strategic by applying ToC. The development of a ToC for a wetland management programme typically involved various different stakeholders and assisted in formulating a shared intervention design by the main actors and agreeing on the different contributions and roles of actors.

CDI facilitates to strengthen ToC capacity

Facilitating a ToC process requires sufficient time to examine and reflect on grounded beliefs, values and experiences of our clients. Their capacities and that of other participants form the starting point in designing facilitation steps and supporting them in developing stronger ToC capacities. The team, organisation or network already has tacit, implicit thinking about how change happens and about their own role in change processes. Recognising and acknowledging existing understanding is an important first step when facilitating a ToC process. It empowers people, as it recognises and acknowledges elements of ToC practice they have been practising.

Stronger ToC capacity is what we like to achieve

ToC capacity consists of a combination of specific abilities that allow people to practice ToC thinking. It relates to strategic thinking, being able to use analytical tools in an appropriate way, being aware of your own limited perspective, a critical questioning attitude and more. ToC practice is shown by practitioners who are able to design and engage in a reflection and analysis process that allows them to deepen the ToC. ToC capacity is also revealed by a deliberate choice of applying a mix of customised tools in ToC practice. This needs practice, self-confidence, critical self-reflection and awareness about areas where theory is falling short.

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