Policy Brief

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THE HIDDEN LIFE OF THEORIES OF CHANGE

End-Term Evaluation of the
Citizen Agency Consortium

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THE HIDDEN LIFE **OF THEORIES OF CHANGE**

INTRODUCTION

Theory of Change is thought to be very useful for learning and adaptive management of complex interventions such as advocacy.[1] Nevertheless, the use of Theory of Change is also under critique. One common criticism is that Theory of Change is often used as a framework that fixes agreements rather than as a living, guiding tool that helps reflection and adaptation.[2] However, while such criticism stresses forms of control, little research has looked at the way Theory of Change and advocacy practice relate.

This is a pertinent issue considering that formally agreed Theories of Change and realities on the ground can be very different. This raises questions: Do advocates work in ways different from what Theory of Change states, and if so, how, and why? How does the way they strategize relate to formal Theories of Change? With what implications? In this brief, we explore these more hidden aspects of the life of Theories of Change.

1. See e.g. Mayne 2015, Vogel 2012.
2. See e.g. Infinitas International 2016; Valters 2014
3. Barrett et al. 2016.



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We do this on the basis of a study of the role Theory of Change played in the Citizen Agency Consortium. This Consortium, implemented by Hivos, IIED, and Article 19, was a five-year strategic partnership with the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, under its Dialogue and Dissent framework program (2016-2020). We primarily focused on one of the Consortium's programs, which was an advocacy and advocacy capacity development program focused on a specific theme, seeking to benefit people in countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Advocacy can be understood here as a wide range of activities conducted to influence others. This goes beyond influencing policy and aims for sustainable changes in public and political contexts, including awareness-raising, legal actions, and public education, as well as building networks, relationships, and capacity.[3]

The program was developed and carried out by staff of Hivos regional and global hub offices and their partners. We studied documents charting the initiation and evolution of the program and conducted 13 in-depth interviews with advocates and managers.

Below, we present our main findings, many that shed new light on Theory of Change. We conclude with an analysis leading to recommendations that are of particular relevance for CSOs active in and donors supporting and assessing multi-country advocacy programs in ways that involve Theories of Change.

01

FORMAL **THEORIES OF CHANGE PROVIDED DIRECTION** AND ORGANIZED ACTORS

Literature on Theory of Change tends to highlight the ways that it provides space and encouragement for development actors to engage with the complexity and dynamics of change processes and their contexts. While interviewees did confirm that, their discussions gave more prominence to five ways formal Theories of Change helped to organize the collective, leading the work into a defined direction and shaping the roles of the organizations involved.

FIRST, Theory of Change provided *direction.* At an early stage of the program, the Hivos Global Office took a leading role in developing what interviewees commonly call the program's 'generic Theory of Change' for subsequent 'adaptation' at national level. Theory of Change then provided a framework within which the program was further contextualized. Long-term objectives defined at the top level in the generic Theory of Change remained important as reference points for decision making throughout the program and were not very flexible. In line with this, we found that some national-level managers and advocates describe Theory of Change not in terms of *theorizing,* but in terms of guidance: 'a framework', 'a road map', 'a wish list', 'a guiding document'.

Beyond these highest-level objectives, elements of Theory of Change could be negotiated. Partners were encouraged to identify achievable objectives at intermediate level and define strategies, thereby building ownership as well as a change process fitted to context. As one national-level Hivos manager explained:

> We could look at the Theory of Change and there would be items that were very ambitious, and one could wonder if anyone was even working on this. But we would consider whether people would be able to work on something, and shift. Partners were to put things into the Theory of Change that they were capable of doing and that we thought were achievable.

This translation is a key feature of a successful Theory of Change process in the eyes of many national and global managers. However, some interviewees working as national-level Hivos managers reported that partner organizations experienced the generic Theory of Change they had to use as starting point as the imposition of an alien tool or theory, sometimes even speaking of the generic Theory of Change as in comprehensible, disagreeable or unworkable. Working with it then typically involved struggle towards contextualization and adaptation.

SECOND, Theory of Change is a tool that helped *organize engagement between the different actors*. Much of the analysis and development of direction for the program took place through interaction between partners working at national level. This involved building shared direction through adaptation of the Theory of Change. It often also involved dividing tasks between partners, commonly with each one needing to find their 'place' or 'fit' within the national-level Theory of Change. An interviewee working at country level explained how this worked in his country:

> We were five partners and each one sort of has a responsibility to achieve one pathway or two pathways in the Theory of Change. We had discussions and found that you meet people that have their own responsibility and their own take in that Theory of Change agenda. People have their own targets, so the responsibilities are quite distributed within the package.

THIRD, managers at the different levels use Theory of Change as a *management* tool. They referred to it to make sure objectives were adhered to, and focus developed, as well as (in most cases) a degree of ownership. To an extent, it was also used to get information on what was going on in the program. Some interviewees also described Theory of Change as an accountability instrument to assess progress. As reporting now focused on outcomes, and partners were encouraged to take ownership, in some cases, thereby accountability came in for outcomes of partners' self-defined roles in programs.

FOURTH, *relations between organizations* were created and maintained by both the content and the processes of Theories of Change. These relations could be the result of politics as a formal Theory of Change can be a negotiated document, accommodating consortium members as well as partners; or of the use of Theory of Change as a political tool, for example, to enforce alignment of objectives and strategies on colleagues and partners. While some interviewees said more open-ended processes facilitated accommodation of different partners, some national-level managers reported that a stronger focus imposed by the global office would hinder buy-in and ownership. Some of these managers spoke of Theory of Change as a frustrating experience for partners.

FIFTH, Theory of Change helped *learning,* but not always in the ways commonly suggested. Learning and adaptation did happen through reflection meetings and other interactions within national-level partnerships, and encouraged some 'thinking through' and articulation of how change was supposed to happen and by whom.

02

REAL-LIFE **STRATEGIZING**

So how is that space to experiment used in advocacy? Many interviewees see advocacy as unplannable. They report the constant need to shift their attention and the things to consider in response to ever-changing circumstances and fleeting opportunities. Unplannability also results from the fact that actions of an advocate not only interact with those of other actors, but also that actions may provoke other actions, opening new and often unforeseen opportunities as well as challenges. In this multitude of possibilities, voices, and potential risks, interviewees indicate that what works best is to keep your eye on the goal, while, constantly re-negotiating the best way to go about achieving them. As an interviewee said:

> Your objectives do not change so much over time, so you know more or less what your long-time direction is, and then it is just looking for opportunities. So that is a very simple job: you know what you do, what you want to do, and you look for opportunities.

This 'best way to go' aligns with a continual emergence of windows of opportunity, in which one or several 'best-ways-to-go' can be hypothesized in advance. How to identify a window of opportunity, and in the moment turn it into a step towards a desired change, defines much of an advocate's work. An advocate has to be ready to jump on a suddenly emerging opportunity, to think, and think differently in a flash, and decide to go for it. Much depends on being at the right spot, listening in at the right time, to the right actor, and being flexible. 'What am I trying to do?' emerges as a taxing process of simultaneously making sense of actions and actors at multiple levels, all the while judging a situation on the run. This makes advocacy a continuous race to check newly emerging information, learn, and update knowledge. Yet, while reflection and learning on-the-go are not often explicitly mentioned as part of an advocate's must-have toolkit, they appear to play an important role shaping advocates' work. As one interviewee notes:

> They (advocacy targets) are all different. And the more you get to know them as people,the better you can tweak [your approach] because at that level that you're working, it's really about figuring out what would make this vessel tick.



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At the same time, learning is not only a race to acquire and update contextualized knowledge about how what works in that sector at the time for that particular person. It needs to be understood as linked to an advocate's position and personal characteristics. Interviewees describe learning as an adaptive process of personal growth, through which an advocate can branch out, over time, to other actors and other opportunities.

These personal assets of relations and characteristics determine and weave through an advocate's learning and allow an advocate to undertake certain actions and strategies that another person is not able to. Therefore, an advocate's insights and their particular learning process are not necessarily useful or transferable to others. Furthermore, as policy influencing is a dynamic field, this learning process needs to be continuous and close to the action to drive advocacy effectively. Interviewees indicate their constant maneuvering to remain relevant and achieve change. While the relevance of chance is obvious, an advocate's ability to read chance as windows of opportunities and turn them into stepping stones towards desired change is fundamental to success. Chance encounters blend with the personality of the advocate and other personal factors, including his or her relations and network, knowledge, skills, and enthusiasm for a person or a topic. Interestingly, in this process of sense-making and deciding, advocates' reasoning is validated and strengthened by fast cycles of learning. These are cranked up through quick fact checking, corroborating, or bouncing off ideas with trusted allies or team members, and gathering of information or 'intel', as one advocate called it. This points to cycles of interactive learning and change within advocates' carefully nurtured social networks that function as sounding boards for learning and theorizing. As a result, advocacy practice appears to be driven by locally negotiated, constantly changing communities of practice.

From the discussion above, it flows that formal Theory of Change does not anticipate or reflect the kinds of dynamics and opportunities to which advocates must respond if they are to be effective. Rather than use the Theory of Change to guide day-to-day decisions about which way they should go, advocates explained that they would reference their Theory of Change to test if there were strong reasons why they should NOT act on an opportunity. As an advocate explained:

> You see all kinds of opportunities every day and you have to choose which to pick and that is always difficult, because you see something and you want to jump on it and go for it. Then the Theory of Change helps you to align and to decide, okay, this fits in or not.

Theory of Change thus serves more as the advocate's compass and large-scale map as they navigate their way through shoals and reefs than as a guide for making day-to-day choices.

However, there was agreement among interviewees across levels that a good Theory of Change should be simple. This appears to run counter to Theory of Change literature that hails it as a tool to develop well-thought-through program theory showing all-knowing mastery, comprehensive understandings of assumptions, pathways of change, their mechanisms, and relevant contextual factors. A Theory of Change that shows this level of detail is then assessed as a good Theory of Change.

Across levels, interviewees stressed the importance of having space not only to use one's own (evolving) understanding of what can be achieved to fill in national-level Theories of Change, in particular pathways of change, but also to act agilely in an ever-dynamic context. In this view, the less detailed, especially a generic, program-level Theory of Change is, the less it imposes a hard-to-understand and alien framework on partners in a manner that may undermine ownership building and adaptation.

Personal assets of relations and characteristics **determine** and weave through an *advocate's learning*

03

INVISIBLE **ASSETS**

The people we interviewed mentioned three other factors important to the success of programs that were not expressed in the formal Theories of Change they worked with. These factors, which relate to personal assets, further weaken/reduce the role of Theory of Change as a tool for day-to-day planning and strategizing. They also draw attention to the need to acknowledge these factors while developing and working with Theory of Change for the way it can disable or enable advocates' utilization of such assets.

A FIRST FACTOR is *relationships and networking*. Interviewees explained how relationships, and the capacity to carry out relationship work, are central to their strategizing. Gaining access to advocacy targets is helped by personal connections. Close knowledge of the personal views or agenda of a decision-maker helps to develop a productive relation. Collaboration over a longer term on such a basis builds trust. Relatedly, interviewees sometimes discussed advocacy not as a process of influencing, but as a process of building community with other actors, including advocacy targets such as policymakers. As we heard from an advocate:

> The people we usually consult in the ministry are very much interested in what we do or what we're trying to achieve, and they usually say, 'We are here to help you', that's what we usually get. So, I don't think it's really hard or it's really easy, but it's mostly built on trust, I mean, among people like us.

To achieve conditions where relations of trust can be built, networking is essential. As one interviewee states:

> ...if you want to be able to do direct lobby to the government, it's about your network, it's not about, you just send the letter and that kind of stuff, but you do have to build a network so that the government would like to see you, otherwise they wouldn't hear you, because they will ask 'who are you?'

Networks, the veins through which both information and recommendations flow, are created and maintained primarily by personal connections. They are personal assets that an individual brings to the job, and they will, presumably, take those personal relationships with them when they leave. These personal assets deliberately do not form a part of formal Theories of Change, as succinctly put by several respondents, 'nobody wants to share their networks'.

A SECOND FACTOR is *tacit knowledge:* advocates' tacit knowledge of 'what works', and its evolution. When it comes to making strategic decisions, advocates sometimes referred to their way of working as not based on explicit reasoning. Often, they did so in somewhat apologetic terms, relating to the fact that the formal processes and documentation of reasoning, as in Theories of Change, does not capture their way of strategizing. For example, while confident in their knowledge as a basis for acting, shaped by years of experience as advocates, some still spoke of their strategizing as rooted in 'gut feeling' or as 'a bit chaotic'. One interviewee went so far as to state that these forms of reasoning, even though apparently central to their success as an advocate, are 'really not a traditional way of doing things'.

Tacit knowledge, as it grows over time, is not only personal but also largely invisible to those who carry it. This knowledge is tied to specific real-life developments and advocates' implicit understandings of how to move in these effectively – for example when interpreting an advocacy target's reaction to a proposal made in a meeting as a sign of interest. It often manifests as heuristics that are not captured and do not convert into formal elaboration within Theories of Change. This lack of transfer persists even though advocates constantly consult with peers. As one interviewee explained:

> I mean, we talk a lot in our team and discuss ways forward. And so, in that sense, we do learn and adapt. But that is something different than really going back to the formal assumption that we wrote down and putting that into a learning...

The modes of strategizing that advocates use on a day-to-day basis to guide practice are not reflected in formal Theories of Change. That appears to be so because Theory of Change does not accommodate the forms of knowledge and learning that our interviewees find useful in guiding practice.



Important to the **success** of **programs:** *relationships* and networking, tacit **knowledge** and **energy**



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A THIRD FACTOR is *energy:* the term as used by interviewees can be translated as the felt conviction that builds passion and can propel action in a certain direction. As one interviewee explained:

> First of all, you have to analyze well what is the best opportunity with the less cost, the most efficient one. But in the end, it is also where you feel the energy of yourself and your team. Because I think a lot of advocacy is really about changing narratives, influencing people and you need a kind of convincing energy for it. There is a lot of personal stories and feeling and gut feeling as well around that.

This energy can also be a factor when selecting pathways of change to pursue. When advocates face hard choices about the overwhelming number of things that they should do, the decision they make may be informed by where their energy is.

a Theory of Change for an advocacy program is *not a map* with boxes of **to-be-achieved** outcomes

04

HOW CAN **THEORY OF CHANGE** HELP ADVOCACY?

If the heart of advocacy is a continuous process of sense-making within evolving contextually appropriate modes of reasoning, reaching out, learning and deciding, all powered and supported by personal assets, how then does Theory of Change help advocacy?

Advocacy is characterized by multi-dimensional emergence of windows of opportunity, of actors, of possibilities for encounters, and of threats and risks at nested levels and time frames that are structurally incompatible with formal Theory of Change deliberation. Decisions around advocacy practice, what to pick up, what to ignore, what to do next, are not determined by the boxes in a Theory of Change, but by close, mutually shaping interactions between advocates and their context. As a result, a Theory of Change for an advocacy program is not a map with boxes of to-be-achieved outcomes. A snapshot taken at any point during its implementation may look more like an Emmental cheese with ignored pathways, vibrant try-out pockets, and outcomes already achieved beyond the original ambitions. Although introduced to guide practice in precisely these sorts of circumstances, a Theory of Change approach cannot drive advocacy practice, and attempts to have it do so may be harmful. However, interviewees point to three ways in which working with Theory of Change has supported their advocacy work.

FIRST, a Theory of Change serves as a *process tool for negotiating bounded freedom*, which respects and supports an advocate's much-needed agility to act on perceived windows of opportunity, and at the same time provides a collective framework for action. This helps to strike an effective and negotiated balance between individual freedom and collectively agreed goals.

SECOND, a Theory of Change *captures the collective ambitions* of a program to which a group of advocates can periodically return to chart their hopefully convergent paths, challenge implicit assumptions, recalibrate, and jointly reflect and make sense. Consequently, by building on their experiences and learning, a Theory of Change helps a group of advocates to think through more sharply their actions and strategies. This allows for aligning learning across allies and partners, and creating synergy between actions and initiatives. It also strengthens theorizing in support of context-sensitive ways of working.

a Theory of Change can serve advocacy work by *bridging* **formality** and informality

THIRD, a Theory of Change can serve advocacy work by *bridging formality and informality.* That is, although a Theory of Change describes the formal goals that provide direction for advocates, it does not necessarily constrict the freedom and flexibility they require to be effective in an ever-changing context. Consequently, working with Theory of Change provides operational space for advocates to harness to the fullest their knowledge, skills, and networks to undertake actions that may need to remain under the radar. Theory of Change can thus function as a tool to translate between constantly changing communities of advocacy practice in a manner that is compatible with formal requirements and accountabilities. This makes Theory of Change an accepted product and process approach to bridge the world of explicit formalities in development cooperation and advocates who agilely pursue shifting intermediate objectives in a sea of constant change. This is a crucial advantage compared to other approaches and tools, such as logframes (LFA), in which outputs and actions are set in a manner that restrict the space to maneuver in an ever-changing context.



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a Theory of Change *can help* a group or team of **advocates** to think through what they **aim to achieve**



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4. https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/theories-of-change-logframes-on-steroids-a-discussion-with-dfid/
5. This discussion was inspired by profound feedback from James Taylor and Jenny Chapman

05

CONCLUSIONS AND **RECOMMENDATIONS**

While highly detailed program-level Theories of Change may be much appreciated in donor review processes, they risk handicapping advocates' day-to-day practice as well as ownership building. Theory of Change, especially when detailed, can be an instrument of control, where 'buy-in' is required into theory devised by others and advocates are made accountable for those results. Such Theory of Change disregards the key role of locally embedded expertise and invisible assets, as well as diversity of understandings, local agendas, approaches, and energy that drives action. It also ignores unplannability, potentially impeding the everyday agility needed to navigate changing contexts and jump on opportunities.

The risks are particularly relevant for how Theory of Change is used in programs such as the one studied here: a multi-country program, centrally administered and funded by an established INGO, involving multiple national chapters or partners in a collective endeavor, with upward accountability to the INGO and the program donor. However, depending on how it is used, Theory of Change can also enable.

One enabling potential of Theory of Change is that it can help a group or team of advocates to think through what they aim to achieve, unearth and untangle accompanying hypotheses and thereby deepening the level of theorizing. This would return Theory of Change to its reflexive and theorizing origins. A way to bank on and even heighten this potential is to perceive, design and work with a Theory of Change as a menu of possible options and ambitions that reflect a plausible diversity of assumptions. This would move Theory of Change away from a unitary accountability-focused instrument, a 'logframe on steroids'[4] according to Alfredo Ortiz, back into the realm of discovery and open-endedness. Before long, this will encourage exploration and testing, foregrounding the iterative nature Theories of Change, and ultimately, its theorizing potential. A way to achieve this is to accompany a more simplified, visual Theory of Change with a narrative that offers space and freedom to voice multiple ambitions, and functions as a resource of contingent possibilities. A second potential of Theory of Change is to function as a negotiated and accepted framework, providing a language that connects levels and actors while leaving a workable degree of open-endedness and space for experimentation and learning-while-doing.

Endorsing both potentials would provide a way of working with Theories of Change that not only comes close to the realities of advocates on the ground in diverse contexts, but also would empower them to assume ownership of the process.

However, our study has led us to a more fundamental reflection on Theory of Change.[5] Theory of Change can provide a framework through which to detect some of the complexities of day-to-day navigation. Through that, collaborators can appreciate better the capacities of those with whom they collaborate. However, Theory of Change seems to be replacing logframes as the non-negotiable starting point in accessing and then accounting for funds. Like logframes, Theory of Change is presently commonly used to legitimize funding. Applicants are fundable when their Theory of Change tells donors a story that they assess as convincing. These stories must, with a ritual nod to uncertainty, predict future circumstances, causal relations in those futures, and the impact of their future actions

within those futures. A Theory of Change can therefore be seen as a formal rite of passage only loosely coupled to the competencies required for successful practice, or --and this is the path that worries us-- the content that finds its way into a Theory of Change may be misread as capturing all that really matters.

If a Theory of Change is thought to capture all that really matters, it naturally becomes part of a measurable package to be submitted to a funder together with a results framework and indicators, to be accounted for later on. This managerial approach to doing development has been the subject of withering criticism for many years. The rise of Theory of Change was, at least partly, motivated by these critiques, as it is more sensitive to complexity. However, the potential of Theory of Change is subverted when it is used to improve certainty and taking control.

The narrative methods we used in this study permitted us to see, to some extent, the world through the eyes of those whose practices constitute a particularly complex corner of development cooperation: advocacy. Through their eyes, we find ample evidence consistent with studies suggesting that change in multi-actor, multi-level systems unfolds in highly diverse and unpredictable ways. In the advocates' daily navigation, we did not hear of one single consciously held Theory of Change. Rather, we met a multiplicity of partial and partially consciously held, competing, and intersubjectively negotiated Theories. Importantly, these constantly emerging Theories appeared to offer appropriate grounds for action in complex environments.

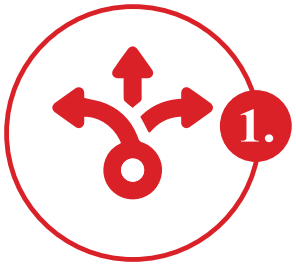
We worry that many of the strengths that recommend Theory of Change, and for which it was introduced, will be lost when it becomes incorporated in established, control-oriented, uncertainty-reducing funding practices. Our concern goes beyond the risk of a 'logframe on steroids'. We are deeply concerned that this way of working has reduced Theory of Change to serving the well- documented tendency of development assistance to standardize, to pretend to be able to capture messy realities and practices in neat, administratively convenient frameworks. Despite the discourse of prioritizing local or Southern ownership, this top-down roll-out of how Theory of Change is to be regimented and assessed provides distant managers forced to steer programming with documents that seem to afford adequate understanding -- while the levels of insight and embedding required for effectiveness cannot possibly be realized.

This setup, often wrapped in the language of transparency, restricts the spaces within which locals enact translations between funding requirements and local realities, and structurally encourages diminishing, deskilling, and delegitimizing local partners rather than eliciting and celebrating their craft and knowledge.

If Theory of Change is to meet its promises, its usage must move away from control and towards facilitation and mutual engagement. Such move would also facilitate advocates' optimal usage of invisible assets that are instrumental to their effectiveness.

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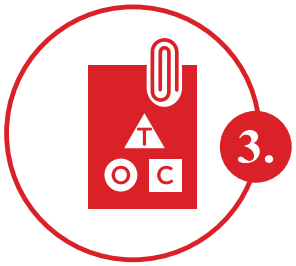
RECOMMENDATIONS



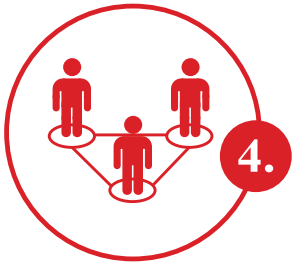
Perceive, design, and work with a Theory of Change as a menu of possible options and ambitions that reflect a diversity of plausible assumptions.



Make sure Theories of Change are simple enough to invite and accomplish this.



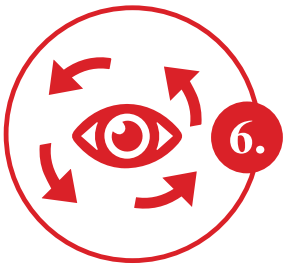
Accompany a simple visual Theory of Change with a narrative that offers space and freedom to voice multiple ambitions, and functions as a resource of possibilities that might be pursued, depending on circumstances.



Use Theory of Change to build a shared framework that connects levels and actors, while leaving a workable degree of open-endedness, space for experimentation, and learning-while-doing.



In developing and working with Theory of Change, enable advocates in using their invisible assets such as relations, contextual knowledge, and energies that propel action.



Oversight should focus on processes through which Theory of Change is enacted rather than on the content of the documents so produced.



Funding and accountability of multi-country programs based on program-level Theories of Change should be reconsidered, to be made more qualified, cognizant of its limitations and potential to engage and facilitate. More attention should be given to how Theories of Change will be formed and evolve at country and regional level.



Donors and INGOs should work with Theory of Change from a recognition of programmatic dependence on knowledge that is held by people in target countries and regions.

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