

- læring og metodeudvikling på tværs

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Theories of Change for Monitoring and Evaluation

Practice makes perfect?¹

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1.	Introduction	3
2.	The problems with Theories of Change	3
2.1	Product over process	4
2.2.	Not enough preparation	4
2.3.	Participation can be challenging and contradictory	4
2.4.	Too general, too far from M&E plans	4
2.5.	Can lead to the illusion that change is linear	5
2.6.	Assumptions left untested	5
3.	How the problems with Theories of Change affect M&E	6
3.1.	M&E plans are left inside the drawer	6
3.2.	Weak theories of change, weak M&E	6
3.3.	Linear evaluations	6
3.4.	Assumptions left unchallenged	7
3.5.	Compromised institutional learning	7
4.	Proposed solutions to improve practice	8
4.1.	Testing and challenging assumptions	8
4.3.	Accept that theories of change simplify reality, but address this in M&E	9
5.	Conclusion	9
6.	References	10

List of abbreviations

M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
TOC	Theory of Change

Abstract

This paper reviews recent debates about the role of Theories of Change in Monitoring and Evaluation. It argues that TOCs are too frequently left disconnected from M&E, usually because TOCs are treated as products rather than processes, and because there is too little critical feedback to make TOCs more accurate and practical. The paper proposes potential steps organizations can take to integrate TOCs with M&E.

1. Introduction

As the trend of using theories of change (TOCs) for strategy design grows, many organizations believe that having them in place is equivalent to good monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Experience shows however that this is not always the case. Often, TOCs are not followed through the programme cycle, left to rest in a drawer and only brought back to life at the time of reporting to donors. In many cases, the process of developing a TOC is not participatory enough, and this compromises its legitimacy and effectiveness. M&E plans are often detached from TOCs, contributing to the tendency of leaving them aside when it comes to monitoring progress in real time. TOCs can lead organizations to focus their evaluations only on the expected outcomes – rather than including unintended impacts.

These are just some of the common pitfalls getting in the way of using TOCs for successful M&E. Arguably, the key test for TOCs is whether organizations are able to challenge their assumptions of change – sometimes going against their institutional beliefs and worldviews. After all, TOCs should help organizations to challenge their assumptions and take corrective action as a result. This is implicit in the definition of TOCs which “can be understood as a way to describe the set of assumptions that explain both the mini-steps that lead to a long term goal and the connections between these activities and the outcomes of an intervention or programme” (Anderson quoted in Stein and Craig, 2012).

In this paper, I argue that TOCs can have immense value for M&E – but only if they are kept informed and updated as a result of experience and evidence. Crucially, TOCs should allow organizations both to make assumptions of change explicit and to challenge them on a continuous basis. They should be the basis for effective M&E plans, helping organizations to adjust strategies in real time, and provide the basis for comprehensive evaluations that investigate unintended impacts. Consequently, the key to success for TOCs is in how they are applied and in the ability of organizations to look at themselves critically – although this is usually not easy. In the paper, I describe some of the most common practical challenges faced by organizations and provide some recommendations for the application of TOCs for effective M&E. I do this using an organizational and practical lens (referring to questions of management) rather than a technical (or methodological) frame.

2. The problems with Theories of Change

One of the most common problems with TOCs is that the theory in itself can be flawed. This can be caused by several factors: from considering TOCs as a product and not paying attention to the process to the challenges of participation, including power dynamics within the group; from poor preparation and research leading to weakening the design process to the production of very general TOCs. In addition organizations usually struggle to make assumptions underlying TOCs clear and M&E frameworks rarely include steps to monitor them. These problems around designing TOCs can directly affect the quality of M&E. This section explores some of these factors showing why TOCs as a tool alone is no guarantee to setting the basis for good M&E.

2.1 Product over process

Although organizations interpret TOCs in different ways, the ubiquitous (and useful) guidelines to develop TOCs all emphasize that process is important. Organizations are encouraged to see TOCs both as a process and as a product. Institutional donor's research and advice offer similar views. A key element to consider when developing TOCs, we hear, is that the process is participatory to both enrich the thinking around the TOC and ownership of staff, partners and communities. In reality, organizations tend to be more concerned with the production of TOCs rather than with the process of developing them. This is justified by time and budget constraints, internal and external deadlines (especially proposals to donors), and a concern that spending too much time on strategy development might not be an effective use of resources. The result is that TOCs might not be as well informed as they could be; buy in from staff and partners might be compromised; the potential for M&E and learning is diminished as well as the quality of the TOC.

2.2. Not enough preparation

The images we have of designing a TOC usually involve people in a workshop holding coloured pens thinking about the best way to change the world. But experience shows that a successful TOC design requires previous research and analysis and that the 'workshop' is a step, a product, in the design process. In many cases, poor preparation and research will become clear at the workshop (making it obvious that more work is required) but time and budget constraints will get in the way of designers being able to further invest on contextual analysis. In addition, designers might feel they lack the competence to carry out comprehensive research. Ultimately, the pressure of producing a TOC will be stronger than the strength of the process. This problem contributes to resulting in weak TOCs, which in turn can make M&E ineffective or misleading. Meaningful participation can help address this problem but it is not exempt from contradictions and challenges.

2.3. Participation can be challenging and contradictory

Most development organizations agree that participation is important when designing TOCs, as participatory principles often go hand-in-hand with human rights and empowerment. Operationalizing these principles however can fail in the face of poor practical guidelines and inadequate staff competences. Participation might fail both inside organizations, and with the external stakeholders targeted by TOCs. For instance, the organization might not be able to deal with power dynamics within the group designing the TOC. Plus, despite good intentions, engaging with stakeholders might, consciously or unconsciously, fail to include those groups or individuals who are less confident to express themselves in a particular context – i.e. typically the case of women, children. This is either because the facilitator is unable to manage power dynamics within the group, or because the organization is too selective in its participatory approach. Designing TOCs often suffers from the same problems that it tries to address. For example, if the intervention aims to improve participation and inclusion of women in community and government decisions then it is likely that organizations will face difficulties to include women in the discussions that help articulating the TOC. Poor participation affects the quality of the TOC and consequently M&E.

2.4. Too general, too far from M&E plans

TOCs will usually outline high-level general changes the intervention wants to see but it is normally harder for designers to be able to articulate intermediate changes and the key assumptions underpinning the change. This is a problem for succeeding in observing changes, which will only be possible over an extended period of time. In addition, in certain contexts and more often than not, TOCs cannot express the reality of what it wants to achieve because this would put people at risk or jeopardize the programme of work. This is certainly the case in human rights work in many countries and generally on governance work and rights approaches in development. More

often as not, detailed M&E plans will only be developed later on with the added risk of indicators being detached from the TOC. Organizations typically feel more comfortable with developing output indicators rather than outcomes, which in turn makes it harder to challenge assumptions of change and contribution.

2.5. Can lead to the illusion that change is linear

Try googling “theory of change” and images like the one below will come up.

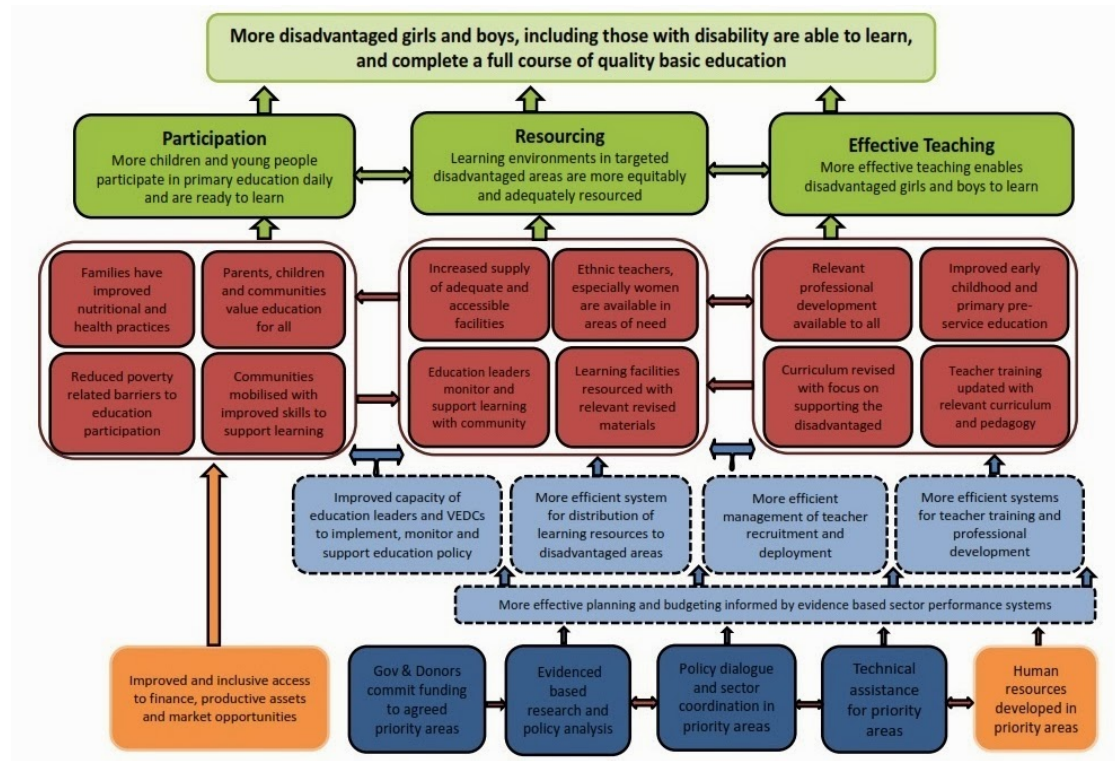


Fig.1: Theory of Change underlying increasing education

Source: <http://mandenews.blogspot.dk/2013/10/complex-theories-of-change-recipes-for.html>

Accessed December 22, 2013

Such diagrams are useful in providing an at a glance view of what the intervention wants to achieve and how. These diagrams are however a simplification of reality. The problem is that these kinds of diagram connect important themes with arrows, but do not explain how these causalities, or processes, will happen. In effect, these arrows communicate assumptions, but they do not indicate processes. In their graphical simplicity, TOCs can mislead users to believe that “x can cause y through the intervention of z” whereas, in reality, “it would be presumptuous to say that your intervention is the only way possible to bring about the desired impact” (Mayne, 2012).

2.6. Assumptions left untested

What makes TOCs different from log-frames (and other approaches to strategy design and planning) is that they should make assumptions of change explicit, and therefore assumptions should be open to both testing, and – if necessary – corrective action. The problem here is that organizations do not find it that easy to deal with assumptions. Practice shows that usually organizations struggle to defy their own change paradigms or

organizational TOCs, which are often linked to their own mission and brands. This includes outlining assumptions on what organizations expect to achieve and how. TOCs are, in addition, placed on a wider paradigm of change – accepted development perspectives, tested models for policy change, institutional donors missions, etc. These models will typically be seen as more powerful than anything a small local NGO could come up with and the voices of those who are ultimately meant to benefit from interventions.

3. How the problems with Theories of Change affect M&E

Inevitably, all the above-mentioned problems will affect the quality and effectiveness of M&E as well as learning.

3.1. M&E plans are left inside the drawer

If the TOC is seen just as a product rather than a process, chances are that it will be the same for M&E plans. Frequently, M&E plans are seen as a document to be added to a proposal or to fulfil some internal requirement. In some cases these are produced too late, compromising the completeness of data collection. Sometimes they are not operationalized: data collection might not be reflected in people's work-plans which will have an impact on ownership of both the TOC and the M&E plan within the organization. Poor ownership can also result in using untested or inappropriate M&E methods with clear consequences on the validity of data and the rigour of analysis. As a result, TOCs might be followed blindly without critical review or adaptation with obvious consequences for the effectiveness of the program and for organizational learning. In defence of TOCs, this can happen with any kind of approach to strategy design. But it also shows that developing a TOC, in itself, is insufficient to make M&E effective.

3.2. Weak theories of change, weak M&E

Even when M&E plans are operationalized effectively, data might be hard to collect and / or it might be the wrong data. Typically, organizations may fall into the tendency of monitoring output level indicators rather than outcomes. For a number of reasons, it is easier for organizations to monitor what the organization controls (outputs) rather than what the organization **influences (outcomes)**³. And yet, TOCs should help organizations to be more outcome-focused in designing both their interventions and in their M&E approaches. But if the TOC only outlines activities and outputs jumping to high-level changes without outlining intermediate outcomes, the M&E plan and general approach will probably struggle and follow the same path. This will add to the difficulties organizations face when assessing impact. In addition, organizations often struggle with dedicating time to critical reflection – and even when this takes place it does not necessarily mean that discussions will be based on evidence produced through the monitoring process of the theory of change.

3.3. Linear evaluations

³The reasons behind this problem are multiple and they will not be exhausted here. One of the documented reasons is the preference to focus on quantitative metrics which leads organizations to focus on activities and outputs – i.e. number of training sessions, number of people reached – and to try and quantify qualitative information on outcomes which would be better expressed in qualitative terms. Some experts “argue that the present tools are adequate but methods are not rigorously applied” (Tsui, 2013). Organizations often feel ill equipped to monitor and communicate outcomes and to meaningfully aggregate results at either program or international level. Perhaps the best way to express this is in the words of an ActionAid staff member in a rural area in Mozambique who told me: “I know that we are achieving results. Every day is very exciting. I just don't know how to communicate it.”

TOCs are inevitably a simplification of reality and rarely able to represent the complexity of development (or other disciplines) programmes of work. A TOC will surely help as a starting point in designing the evaluation questions and terms of reference⁴. The risk however is that the linearity suggested by the TOC – i.e. x leads to y by organization z – can lead to a simplistic approach to evaluation, especially if the TOC jumps from outputs to high level outcomes. The TOC in itself is no guarantee that the evaluation will ask questions around what else has been achieved, how it has been achieved and a result of what – including factors of success not directly attributable to the organization but towards which the organization has contributed⁵. Because the main purpose of developing TOCs is to map a particular intervention to achieve results – rather than contribute to results – they can help perpetuate the idea that evaluations should look for sole attribution rather than attributing the organization's effort to the overall contribution around the subject. Performing evaluations mostly for accountability purposes adds to this problem.

3.4. Assumptions left unchallenged

Very often, evaluations do not test assumptions either because these are too difficult to address, or because the organization is reluctant to challenge its own beliefs and worldviews. This problem is more prominent when the evaluation is carried out to demonstrate accountability to donors, and where there is a risk of exposing the organization's reputation and funding. Ultimately, using a TOC should support organizations in challenging the main assumption of any intervention: achieving positive change. In other words, having a TOC in place is no guarantee that evaluations will take a goal free approach –i.e. looking beyond what the intervention wanted to achieve – such as negative impacts, or the wider causes of change. This is an important challenge for embracing accountability fully. Experience shows that despite good intentions the “do no harm” imperative is not always true. I am not arguing here that all unexpected results can be controlled a priori or can always be detected in evaluation processes. My argument is that a good use of TOCs should include both testing and challenging of assumptions as a key purpose.

3.5. Compromised institutional learning

The key purpose of M&E is to create a process of continual learning that allows interventions to be adapted for increased effectiveness and impact. TOCs can help with this process, but a number of drawbacks can get in the way. Failing to test and challenge assumptions in TOCs can slow down institutional learning. Similarly, focusing mostly on the product rather than the process can lead to little learning and knowledge creation. We all know about the typical situation in which an evaluation report is produced but not much is done with it in terms of bringing the lessons learnt back to the organization or to challenge findings and recommendations proposed by consultants and experts. Participation and inclusion are also necessary in order to ensure that that M&E becomes a

⁴Opinions on whether TOCs are useful for evaluation are divided: some suggest that a complex program tends to be “too difficult to explain its objectives in tangible terms, too amorphous to deliver, and too difficult to meaningfully evaluate” (Rogers, 2008, quoting Pinnegar, 2004). Others “have found ways to address the challenges of complicated and complex aspects of interventions” (Rogers, 2008).

⁵At the basis of “attribution vs. contribution” debate is whether the changes observed are the result solely of the programme's intervention (attribution) or whether the programme has played a role in influencing the factors that have made the change happen (contribution). The problem with attribution is that “many suggest that it is difficult, if not impossible, to attribute a change in outcomes to a specific intervention since there are so many factors involved, so we had at best looked for a contribution” (White, 2009). The implications of looking at the attribution dilemma this way is that it should be “argued that the intervention was the sole cause of observed change...for example, infant mortality in a particular region may have fallen by 12 per cent over the period of the intervention. The impact question is how much of that 12 per cent can be attributed to the project?” (White, 2009).

dynamic rather than a static process just focusing on results. Experience shows that all involved in critical reflection and evaluation processes will benefit somehow at a personal level.

4. Proposed solutions to improve practice

I have so far looked at some of the common problems with applying TOCs in practice. I have then outlined how these common problems can affect the quality and effectiveness of M&E processes. In this section I am suggesting possible solutions to both make TOCs work better in practice and in turn help M&E. Some of these suggestions respond directly to the problems outlined above, and some do not.

4.1. Testing and challenging assumptions

As discussed, this is no straightforward task as assumptions “tap into deeper beliefs, values, worldviews, operational ‘rules of thumb’ and analytical lenses that all individuals in development bring to their work” (Vogel, 2012). It is important to note that despite efforts, assumptions will always present a margin of uncertainty and uncontrollability. Some practical steps, however, can be useful. For example:

- At the design stages of a TOC, classify assumptions in terms of what would be the potential negative impact if they do not hold true. Assess whether the risk of negative impact could actually be strong enough to stop the intervention going forward.
- Reassess the TOC and prioritize critical areas to be tested throughout the life of the intervention and ensure these are reflected in the M&E plans.
- Test assumptions through evidence emerging from using participatory approaches and looking at secondary data that would either support or reject the assumption made.
- Ensure that mid-term and final evaluations prioritize the analysis of assumptions, including appropriate methodologies.
- Ensure that lessons are incorporated into future practice without, however, assuming that all lessons are replicable to all contexts.

4.2. Process is as important as product

Effectively using TOCs for M&E purposes involves making the process as important as the product. In practical terms this means outlining a roadmap for the implementation of the TOC from an organizational perspective. What I mean by this is to think of the implications for ownership, resources, workload, research, participation and learning throughout the TOC cycle: from design to implementation to M&E and learning. Below are some suggestions on what to consider in this respect

- Ensure what sort of research and contextual analysis is needed before starting to produce a TOC.
- Factor in practical implications for inclusion and participation of key stakeholders; especially people and communities targeted by the intervention, both at design and evaluation stages.
- Use the TOC as a tool for communication.
- Make sure that the TOC is linked to organizational processes such as overall reporting, finance, staff performance, etc.

- Decide on times for review and reflection around the TOC ensuring that evidence emerging from M&E is brought into the discussions.
- Make a roadmap for learning and include it as part of the plan to deliver the TOC and for handling evaluation results.
- Assign appropriate time and resources for all of the above. Different people might be needed for different stages and aspects of the work.

4.3. Accept that theories of change simplify reality, but address this in M&E

TOCs simplify reality for us, usually presenting change as linear. This brings some benefits for example by helping us to communicate what the intervention is all about and what it is trying to contribute towards. It is essential however that this simplicity and linearity are addressed by M&E processes for example by:

- Developing TOCs that focus on different levels of intermediate outcomes, and hence helping to monitor progress around change.
- Ensure that M&E plans are relevant to the TOC and that quantitative and qualitative indicators are balanced and appropriate.
- Observe whether changes are taking place and reflect on why.
- Reflect upon contribution versus attribution: if there is observable progress towards a desired outcome, not all of this might be the result of the intervention. The TOC and M&E need to be sensitive enough to acknowledge that the intervention might contribute to changes, but not be the only source of change.
- At the same time, however, always question whether your interventions are contributing to the expected outcomes

5. Conclusion

TOCs are neither good nor bad for M&E. It all depends on how organizations apply the TOC in practice. Organizations need to ask whether they see the TOC as a process rather than a product; whether they allow ownership of the process of developing and adapting TOCs; and to what extent the organization is able to challenge their assumptions of change. TOCs can support and enable good M&E but this is contingent on how far organizations are able to go beyond the suggested linearity of TOCs to open up questions of unintended impact and their contribution to change. In summary, having a TOC in place is no guarantee of good M&E. Adopting a critical and dynamic process of applying and rethinking TOCs, however, can enhance both TOCs and M&E.

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