THEORY OF CHANGE

A theory of change is a description of why a particular way of working will be effective to achieve the intended impact. It shows how change is expected to happen, and how the organisation's work is expected to contribute, in the short, medium and long term to achieve the intended impact. It can be represented in a visual diagram, as a 'narrative' (a written description), or both. A theory of change can be created both for an entire organisation's operations or for a specific project - it will have varying levels of details on the basis of what it covers.

A theory of change is most commonly developed at the beginning of a project to help with strategic planning, or can also be used later to describe an existing piece of work so that you can evaluate it. It is particularly helpful if you are planning or evaluating a complex project.

Theories of Change do not have a particular format or structure, though they do cover specific components:
1. External factors that influence change: These can be changes that are beyond your control, such as natural disasters, political events (such as an election), cultural norms, etc.
2. The various groups or people that influence change: They are often called 'stakeholders' and can include community leaders, politicians, project staff, donors, etc.
3. What change you want to happen, and at what level: Outputs and outcomes
4. Timeframes: What changes do you want to see at what stage of your project (short-term, mid-term and long-term).
5. Assumptions should be included between elements at different levels to explain what needs to be true for the described changes at one level to lead to the changes at the next.

Individual donors may have a Theory of Change structure that they use, in which case applications to that donor will need to use their preferred format.

It is helpful to involve a variety of stakeholders when you develop a theory of change. You could include staff, trustees, beneficiaries, partners, funders, and maybe others. The process by which the Theory of Change is developed, and the thinking involved through this process, is often as important as the diagram or narrative you produce.

Examples of other TOCs can be viewed here, here and here (On the Arise website, go to 'Our Approach" and then 'Model' to view our TOC).

How to build a theory of change?

1. **Decide the purpose of your theory of change**

- Identify why you think you need it and how you think it will help.
- Once you are clear about your purpose, think about who you want to involve and why.
- If you are using theory of change for new work, you will likely need to involve key decision makers in your organisation in designing it. If your theory of change is describing existing work, you will probably want to involve people who have previously worked on and benefited from your intervention.

2. **Collect evidence of why you need to carry out your work and the context in which you work**

You should have a clear understanding of the issue you want to address before developing a theory of change. If you're developing a theory of change to plan new work, you'll need to collect two main types of evidence to help you:

- Evidence of need: This helps you to understand why your intervention is needed and the specific requirements of your beneficiaries.
- Evidence of the effectiveness of other interventions seeking to bring about the same intended outcomes: These could be ones you have tried before, or interventions that other stakeholders have run. This may help you to decide on a particular way of working that's most likely to bring about the type of changes you want to see.

3. **Agree your intended impact – the change that you wish to see**

The intended impact should reflect the main issue you are trying to address with your work. Your impact is the starting point for your theory of change, the goal towards which everything is directed. Your impact statement should clearly describe the broad or long-term difference you want to see happen.

4. **Develop your long-term/mid-term/short-term outcomes**

Next, work backwards from your impact to think about the changes that need to happen in order to achieve it. These are sometimes called 'necessary pre-conditions' – this is what needs to change before your long-term impact can be achieved. If you think about what causes the main issue you are trying to address, you will be able to identify what needs to be changed first. Once you have defined these outcomes, you can show the order in which they will need to occur.

5. **Identify outputs**

You are now ready to start thinking about what outputs (products, services or facilities) will help you to bring about the outcomes you have identified.

For a new piece of work, this will involve thinking creatively about the outputs that will be most effective in bringing about your desired outcomes. To help with this, you can review external research to see what kinds of outputs have brought about these outcomes in the past.

If you are creating a theory of change for an existing project, outline the existing activities and outputs from this work. This is a good chance to discuss how well outputs are delivering your expected outcomes and may lead to some revision of what you do, and how you do it.

6. **Clarify assumptions**

Assumptions are the conditions that need to be in place to make the theory work; they explain the logic behind the overall program and the links between each element. Assumptions are usually unstated during planning because we may think they are so obvious that we don't need to mention them. However, stating them is important; they can affect how successful an intervention is and may shape how you deliver your intervention.

For example: If your activities are towards increasing awareness of parents and community members on children's rights, then one assumption to state will be → 'Community members have the time and ability to attend relevant meetings and events'.

Assumptions can be about:
•   The links between activities and outputs, outputs and outcomes, and outcomes and impact
•   The quality and reach of your intervention
•   The roles played by other actors
•   The overall project rationale

As you identify assumptions, consider which are critical - those on which your theory of change rests, and which may obstruct your project. If you identify very significant assumptions underlying that work, you may need to rethink your plans, or at least have plans in place to deal with the risks.

7. **Produce your diagram and narrative**

As you develop your theory of change you will need to present it in a useful format. It is helpful to write up a narrative theory of change as a more complete description of the theory, as diagrams can be difficult to understand on their own.

Your narrative should include:

•   A description of the process by which the theory of change was developed
•   A description of the intended change/impact
•   A summary of the need and context of the intervention
•   A description of the outcomes leading up to the change/impact
•   A description of outputs - how your work will bring your intended outcomes about
•   A description of assumptions, and how you will measure them
•   A description of how you will work with other actors