

What is a Theory of Change?

A Theory of Change (ToC) describes how and why an intervention (project) is assumed to lead to a desired end-result. Often a ToC is defined as the connection between activities and outcomes. It defines the problem that a project aims to resolve, the overall objective and the wider context, including the culture and power relations in which a specific project will take place. Assumptions about behaviour, causal relations and contexts are made explicit and are, as much as possible, supported by evidence.

A Theory of Change is often represented in a visualisation or diagrammatic form with an accompanying explanatory description (narrative).

- The visualisation or diagram gives a clear overview of the different steps of a project (from problem to end-goal)
- The narrative describes the logic or theory underlying the project. This includes the problem statement, context, results, choice of activities, cause-effect relations and the underlying assumptions.

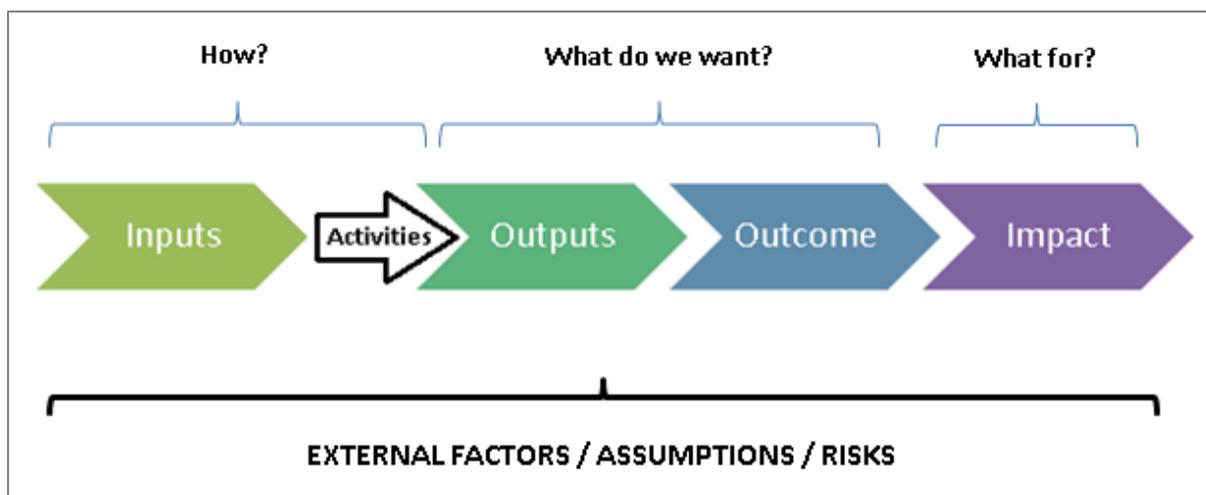
See Annex 1 for the overall Theory of Change of the FBK programme

Elements of a Theory of Change:

Element	Description
Problem statement	What we want to solve. The problem statement describes the problem, why it is a problem (incl. root causes), and whom it affects.
Context	The situation in which the project takes place, incl. stakeholders, power relations, other relevant projects, etc.
Inputs	What we use. Resources are the things that are required for a project, programme or policy (funding, staffing, equipment, curriculum materials, and so on).
Activities	What we do. Activities can be expressed by a verb (“market”, “provide”, “facilitate”, “deliver”).
Outputs	What we produce. Outputs are the tangible products as a result of the activities. They are usually expressed as nouns, are tangible and can be counted (15 trainings, 5 market entry activities, 20 technical assistance missions).
Outcomes	What we achieve. Outcomes are the behavioural changes that result from the project outputs (giving up smoking, providing boiling water, using bed nets). Outcomes can be increased, decreased, enhanced, improved or maintained.
Impacts	Why we do it. Long-term changes are the results that derive from an accumulation of outcomes. These can be similar to strategic objectives.
Assumptions	Assumptions are the necessary conditions for change, or the “underlying conditions or resources that need to exist for planned change to occur”.
Risks	Potential impacts of the programme that may undermine its success.

Intervention monitoring

Results monitoring



A Theory of Change adds external factors (context), assumptions, and risks to a results chain

How does it help with design, planning, monitoring and evaluation?

Developing and using a ToC helps in planning and designing interventions, and in monitoring the project. A ToC can help developing an appropriate and manageable monitoring framework. It requires you to clearly articulate how your activities are expected to lead to outputs, outcomes, and eventually impact. The changes to which you expect to contribute are formulated as the outcomes and outputs in your theory of change. The more clear these are formulated, the easier it will be to identify meaningful indicators to monitor these changes. By making explicit how you expect you will achieve your aspired results, you will be able to steer and adapt the intervention where necessary and get a better insight on what works and doesn't work in your project. ToCs are relevant for projects that seek to solve complex problems, i.e. problems which are unpredictable and constantly changing and therefore require constant monitoring and learning about what works. Finally, a ToC helps in evaluation and in communication about your work and inform others on best practices and lessons learned.

How to develop your Theory of Change:

Key points: how to develop a ToC

- Step 1.** Define the problem, including the identified root causes and stakeholders
- Step 2.** Define the desired end-goal
- Step 3.** Define long- and short-term results needed to achieve the desired end-goal
- Step 4.** Map activities that could lead to the short- and long-term results?
- Step 5.** Identify the main assumptions; how valid or uncertain are they?
- Step 6.** Write a narrative
- Step 7.** Check the consistency of your ToC

In step 1-5, you will create a diagram that visualises your ToC. In step 6 you will describe your visualisation in a narrative, in order to capture what you have done and to relate to later on.

For an example, please see the overall ToC of the FBK programme in Annex 1. You do not need to include all programme level results, but align where possible. N.B. you do need to at least emphasize how you will sustainably embed the due diligence process within the supply chain and involved Dutch company(ies), and how you will ensure the long term implementation of your project.

Step 1. Define the problem, including the identified root causes and stakeholders

What is the problem that you want to address? Who are you aiming to support (i.e. who is the target group)? What is the scope of the problem (e.g. how many girls and boys are working), what are the identified root causes (e.g. lack of education, poverty, orphan hood, etc.)? Who are the main stakeholders?

Step 2. Define the desired end-goal (impact)

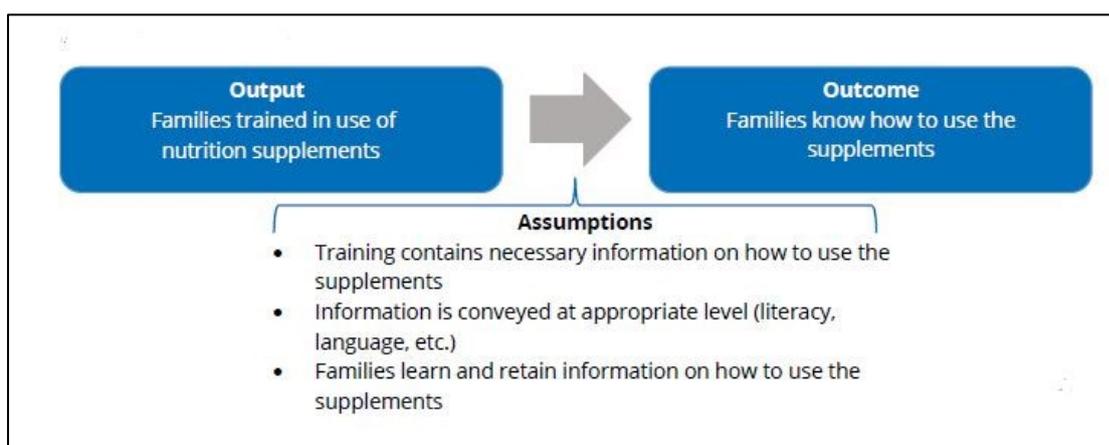
What is the end-goal that you want to contribute to? What needs to be changed in order to solve the problem that you defined? When will your project considered to be a success? Who should benefit from the end-goal?

When defining your end-goal, you may think of certain conditions that are important to achieve the goal. These conditions can serve as sub-results that you need to achieve first before you can achieve your end-goal (see next step).

Step 3. Define long- and short-term results needed to achieve the desired end-goal

After you have defined the problem and end-goal, you can define the long-term and short-term results that you need to achieve before you can achieve your end-goal. I.e. formulate what needs to change in order to achieve your end-goal. Who and what can you influence in order to achieve change?

The relations between the different (sub) results and the problem statement will contain a number of assumptions. Making these assumptions explicit helps to understand and make clear for yourself why and how you expect the intervention to work. During the implementation, monitoring these assumptions helps you to understand why what works or not. Assumptions are always time- and context-specific: often you might not be aware in the beginning that they do not hold everywhere. It is therefore important to make them explicit, so you can later check if they are valid or not. The figure below shows an example of a set of assumptions and their place within a ToC:



Source: *Innovations for Poverty Action* (2016)

There are four types of assumptions:

1. Assumptions about the causal links between outcomes at different levels
E.g. awareness raising activities will change people's attitudes towards child labour which in turn will change their behaviour

2. World view assumptions about drivers behind a change
E.g. companies are the best suited actors to reduce child labour in the value chain because of their influence
3. Assumptions about the belief systems in a society, which inform judgments about what is appropriate and feasible in a specific context
E.g. girls are entitled to go to school as much as boys
4. Assumptions about the context in which your project will operate
E.g. local government is supportive towards elimination of child labour

Step 4. Map activities that could lead to the short- and long-term results

Once you formulated the different short- and long-term results you need to achieve, you can start defining the activities that are needed to achieve these results. Sometimes it helps to go back- and forward between the results and the activities, until you find a logic pathway. It is also possible that results are interlinked (e.g. result X strengthens result Y).

Step 5. Identify the main assumptions; how valid or uncertain are they?

Your ToC will consist of many assumptions. First, prioritise the assumptions and only select those that are critical for the success of your project. Then, validate the assumptions as much as possible based on experiences, literature etc. You can also discuss this with your RVO project advisor or the human rights expert. If you identify assumptions that are critical for the success of your project for which you cannot find clear validation, see what actions you can take to redesign or monitor the project.

Key points: assumptions

1. Assumptions are the ‘theories’ in your theory of change
2. Assumptions often deeply held perceptions that have become ‘rules of thumb’ that are taken for granted
3. Focusing, checking and testing assumptions can improve and inspire new ways of addressing issues

Step 6. Write a narrative

Summarise the visualisation in a narrative. Describe the different ‘*pathways*’ of how your input and activities will lead to your results. Describe the context in which your project will take place, including the relation with other relevant initiatives in the region.

Step 7. Check the consistency of your ToC

Is your ToC consistent? Is there a clear pathway from input to activities, to outputs and outcomes? I.e. is it clear which activities lead to what outputs, and which outputs lead to what outcomes?

Difference with a logframe or intervention logic:

- A Logframe is mainly a management instrument that presents the planned results in the format of a matrix, with indicators at input, output, outcome and impact level. It gives limited attention to causal relations and context, as it mainly shows *what* happened instead of *how* it happened.

- An intervention logic or result chain is an expansion of a logframe. It is more flexible, can include intermediate results, parallel result chains, feedback mechanisms, and external factors. If assumptions are made, these are often not context-specific. An intervention logic shows *what* and *how* something has happened.
- A Theory of Change is not limited to the intervention, but has a broader view on the surrounding context and assumptions. A ToC thus shows *what*, *how*, and *why* something happened, and in *which context*.

Some useful links and examples:

- <https://changeroo.com/toc-academy>
- <http://www.theoryofchange.org>
- <http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-theoryofchange-2004.pdf>
- <http://www.yeni.co.uk/impact/>
- https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE_International_DME_for_Peacebuilding.pdf
- https://www.poverty-action.org/sites/default/files/publications/Goldilocks-Deep-Dive-Guiding-Your-Program-to-Build-Theory-of-Change_2.pdf

Annex 1 – Overall Theory of Change of the FBK programme

