UNDERSTANDING THEORY OF CHANGE IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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UNDERSTANDING 'THEORY OF CHANGE' IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: A REVIEW OF EXISTING KNOWLEDGE

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Summary

This is a review of the concepts and common debates within 'Theory of Change' (ToC) material, resulting from a search and detailed analysis of available donor, agency and expert guidance documents. The review was undertaken as part of a Justice and Security Research Program[2] (JSRP) and The Asia Foundation[3] (TAF) collaborative project, and focuses on the field of international development. The project will explore the use of Theories of Change (ToCs) in international development programming, with field research commencing in August 2012. While this document will specifically underpin the research of this collaboration, we also hope it will be of interest to a wider audience of those attempting to come to grips with ToC and its associated literature.

From the literature, we find that there is no consensus on how to define ToC, although it is commonly understood as an articulation of how and why a given intervention will lead to specific change. We identify four main purposes of ToC – strategic planning, description, monitoring and evaluation and learning – although these inevitably overlap. For this reason, we have adopted the term 'ToC approaches' to identify the range of applications associated with this term. Additionally, we identify some confusion in the terminology associated with ToC. Of particular note is the lack of clarity surrounding the use of the terms 'assumption' and 'evidence'. Finally, we have also drawn out information on what authors feel makes for ToC 'best practice' in terms of both content and process, alongside an exploration of the remaining gaps where more clarity is needed.

A number of 'key issues' are highlighted throughout this review. These points are an attempt to frame the literature reviewed analytically, as informed by the specific focus of the JSRP-TAF collaboration. These issues are varied and include the confusion surrounding ToC definitions and use, the need to 'sell' a ToC to a funder, how one can know which 'level' a ToC should operate on, the relationship between ToC and evidence-based policy, and the potential for accuracy, honesty and transparency in the use of ToC approaches.

This paper does not aim to give definitive answers on ToC; indeed there are many remaining important issues that lie beyond the scope of this review. However, in highlighting a number of key issues surrounding current understandings of ToC approaches, this review hopes to pave the way for more constructive and critical discussion of both the concept and practical application of ToCs.

Methodology

This review covers documents from major donors, development agencies and expert practitioners on ToC approaches. Of 246 documents initially accessed, 48 containing guidance or substantial discussion of ToC were reviewed.[4] The majority of documents

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[2] The JSRP was launched in April 2011 at the LSE International Development Department. The programme involves a consortium of research partners undertaking work on issues of justice, security and governance in fragile and conflict-affected situations.

[3] TAF is a non-profit, nongovernmental organization committed to the development of a peaceful, prosperous, just, and open Asia-Pacific region. TAF support wide-ranging programming across fragile and conflict-affected states in Asia.

[4] A background document contains the full research notes of the authors for all 48 papers. It is notable that although 48 documents were reviewed to provide a measure of guidance on ToC, relatively few are

were obtained through a mix of systematic internet-based searches and snowballing methods. Key papers identified through personal knowledge of the research team were also included. A question template was developed to draw out information from each document and to ensure consistency across researchers.[5] The broader findings of this paper were also informed by discussions within the JSRP-TAF collaboration, including a two-day workshop in June 2012, where the initial findings of this review were presented and debated with numerous stakeholders.

What is a Theory of Change?

The idea of the ToC approach seems to have first emerged in the United States in the 1990s, in the context of improving evaluation theory and practice in the field of community initiatives.[6] Yet the "current evolution draws on two streams of development and social programme practice: evaluation and informed social practice."[7] From the evaluation perspective, ToC is part of broader program analysis or program theory. In the development field, it also grew out of the tradition of logic planning models such as the logical framework approach developed from the 1970s onwards. The notion of developing informed social practice has a long history; practitioners have often sought (and used) tools to attempt to consciously reflect on the underlying theories for development practice.

Since their use in the field of community development, ToC approaches have increasingly become mainstream. This is largely due to the demands of key funders, whose focus on ToCs has strengthened in the last few years. Though some may view ToC as simply a 'buzzword', it does appear that it also represents an increased desire for organisations to be able to explore and represent change in a way that reflects a complex and systemic understanding of development.[8] This desire stems at least in part from the 'results agenda': ToC is seen as a way to plausibly demonstrate impact in fragile and conflict-affected regions of the world.

In its early conceptualisation in 1995, Weiss described a ToC as "a theory of how and why an initiative works."[9] More fully articulated, this 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.[10] ToC has been called a number of other things: "a roadmap, a blueprint, an engine of change, a theory of action and more."[11] Beyond these initial conceptualisations,

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written solely for that purpose. Some documents cited were not fully reviewed but contained enough relevant information to be included in this paper.

[5] See Annex 2 for example template.

[6] For example see Weiss, C.H. (1995). Nothing as Practical as Good Theory: Exploring Theory-Based Evaluation for Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Children and Families. In J. Connell, A. Kubisch, L. Schorr and C. Weiss (Eds.) *New Approaches to Evaluating Community Initiatives: Concepts, Methods and Contexts.* New York, Aspen Institute (65-92)

[7] Vogel, I. (2012). Review of the use of "Theory of Change" in international development. DFID, (April), p. 6.

[8] James, Cathy. (2011). Theory of Change Review: A report commissioned by Comic Relief. London, p. 4.

[9] Weiss (1995)

[10] Anderson, A. (2004). Theory of Change as a Tool for Strategic Planning: A Report on Early Experiences. The Aspen Institute: Roundtable on Community Change, p. 2.

[11] Reisman, Jane, Anne Gienapp, and Sarah Stachowiak (2007). A Guide to Measuring Advocacy and Policy. Organizational Research Services for the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Baltimore, Maryland (USA).

there is little consensus on how ToC is defined. However, like Weiss' initial definition, ToC is most often defined in terms of the connection between activities and outcomes, with the articulation of this connection the key component of the ToC process. The ability to articulate this connection rests on the idea that, "social programs are based on explicit or implicit theories about how and why the program will work."[12] Articulating these theories commonly involves exploring a set of beliefs or assumptions about how change will occur.[13] Though some consider these elements as components of ToC, others define ToCs as themselves beliefs and assumptions about change.[14]

Although ToCs exist in endless variations of style and content, some basic ToC components often "include a big picture analysis of how change happens in relation to a specific thematic area; an articulation of an organisation or programme pathway in relation to this; and an impact assessment framework which is designed to test both the pathway and the assumptions made about how change happens."[15] ToCs are also often presented in the form of a diagram. Keystone, for example, state that one way of presenting a ToC is through a 'pathways to outcomes' diagram.[16] From the examples in the literature, it is clear that these can take any format so long as they aid the process of uncovering and developing the assumptions within the ToC. Though diagrams are commonly used for this purpose, there is a concern that these tend to become incredibly complex.[17] Duncan Green has argued that perhaps it is better (if diagrams are useful at all) to throw them away once completed, lest they 'scare' those new to ToC with their complexity.[18]

In practice, many organisations are therefore more comfortable viewing ToC as a variant of the 'logic model', and summarise their ToC through simple "if…then" statements. For example:

> "**If** there is constructive engagement among key stakeholders on political economy issues, **then** it will improve information flow and lead to a shift in policy and decision making."[19]

The above examples demonstrate how for many ToC is a product, like a physical document or a statement. Other literature views ToC as a process or tool with an emphasis on conceptual thinking: an ongoing process of reflection,[20] a conceptual tool to

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Cited in Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance. (2010). Monitoring & Evaluation of Advocacy Campaigns: Literature Review, p.6. Available at http://www.e-alliance.ch/en/s/advocacy-capacity/resources/evaluating-advocacy-activities/,

[12] Weiss (1995)

[13] As in GrantCraft. (n.d.). Mapping Change: Using a Theory of Change to Guide Planning and Evaluation.; Rogers, P. J. (2012). Introduction to impact evaluation. Impact Evaluations Notes, March(1).OECD Development Assistance Committee. (2008). Guidance on Evaluation Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Activities. Paris; Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. (2011). The Strategy Lifecycle: A Guide. Available at http://www.gatesfoundation.org/about/Documents/The%20Strategy%20Lifecycle.pdf.

[14] See Shapiro, I. (2006). Extending the Framework of Inquiry : Theories of Change in Conflict Interventions. Berghof Handbook, (5)

[15] Intrac. (2012). Theory of Change: What's it all about?, Ontrac: 51 (May), p.2.

[16] Keystone. (2008). Developing a theory of change: A guide to developing a theory of change as a framework for inclusive dialogue, learning and accountability for social impact, p. 18. Available at http://portals.wi.wur.nl/files/docs/ppme/KeystoneTool-DevelopingaTheoryofChange.pdf

[17] For an example of this complexity, 'google image' search "Theory of Change".

[18] Green, D. (2012). From Poverty to Power Blog, "Theories of change = logframes on steroids? A discussion with DFID ", Available at: http://www.oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/?p=10071

[19] CARE International UK. (2012). Defining Theories of Change. January, London, p.5.
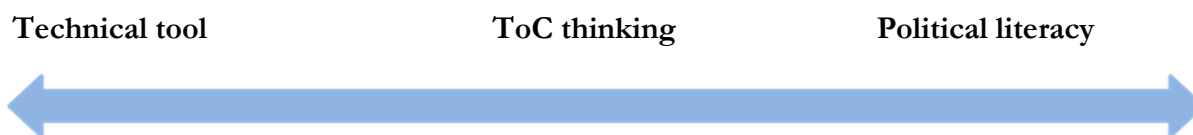
[20] James, Cathy. (2011), p. 3.

explore the changes expected from a set of actions, and a "thinking-action approach."[21] Furthermore, some authors define ToCs in terms of their practical application as an "approach to the design and evaluation of social programmes."[22] Guidance documents tend to highlight some or all of these elements as part of the definition of ToC; more often it is a question of emphasis rather than of highlighting only one element. For example, Guijt and Retolaza are clear that for Hivos, ToC is both a process and an output.[23]

Key Issue: Confusion surrounding Theory of Change

There is a basic problem that different organisations are using the term ToC to mean very different things. If there is no consensus on how to define ToC and it has endless variations in terms of style and content, how can anybody successfully grapple with it? Critics have argued that the failure of ToC proponents to tie it down to any tangible meaning has led people to make unrealistic promises on its behalf. If ToC is to be more than another development 'fuzzword', then greater clarity is needed on a number of levels, starting with common terminology, use and expectations of ToC approaches.

The Purpose of Theory of Change

Just as definitions of ToC vary widely, this literature review found that organisations and donors also view ToC as having a variety of purposes. With this in mind, we propose that ToC approaches can be understood across a continuum. At the far left end is a very technical understanding of ToC representing its use as a precise planning tool, most likely as an extension of the 'assumptions' box in a logframe. In the middle is 'ToC thinking' – suggested by many as the key element of a ToC process[24] – understood as a less formal, often implicit, use as a 'way of thinking' about how a project is expected to work. On the far right side is an approach to ToC which emphasises the need for practitioners to develop 'political literacy', a complex and nuanced understanding of how change happens, allowing them to respond to unpredictable events.[25] This final way moves further away from formal and technical approaches and sees ToC as a way of developing a politically informed and reflexive approach to development.

Technical tool	**ToC thinking**	**Political literacy**

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[21] Often there is overlap of these terms across the literature. For examples see Retolaza, I. (2011). Theory of Change: A thinking and action approach to navigate in the complexity of social change processes. *Hivos/UNDP/Democratic Dialogue*; Mcgee, R., Gaventa, J., Barrett, G., Calland, R., Carlitz, R., & Joshi, A. (2010). Review of Impact and Effectiveness of Transparency and Accountability Initiatives: Synthesis Report. Institute of Development Studies, (October)

[22] Vogel, I. (2012), p.2.

[23] Guijt, I. and I. Retolaza (2012). Defining "Theory of Change", Hivos, E-dialogues (March), 1-7, p.3.

[24] Vogel (2012); Retolaza (2011)

[25] See the ongoing work by Duncan Green for Oxfam on 'how change happens'.

Within this continuum, we have identified four broad categories of purpose:

1. **Strategic planning**: ToC helps organisations practically to map the change process and its expected outcomes and facilitates project implementation. For these purposes, ToC is often used in conjunction with logframe approaches. [26]
2. **Monitoring and evaluation**: ToCs articulate expected processes and outcomes that can be reviewed over time. This allows organisations to assess their contribution to change and to revise their ToC.[27]
3. **Description:** ToC allows organisations to communicate their chosen change process to internal and external partners. A simple description of an organisation's ToC can be understood as minimal way of engaging with ToC.[28]
4. **Learning:** ToC helps people to clarify and develop the theory behind their organisation or programme. This relates to an understanding of ToC as a thinking tool. [29]

While this review has identified four discrete purposes for ToCs, in practice these often overlap substantially. An example of this overlap is the model proposed by Keystone, which advocates using ToC as part of a broader impact planning, assessment and learning approach. [30] The UK Department for International Development (DFID) guidelines to Research Programme Consortia (RPC) also require ToCs during the thinking, planning and evaluation components of the programme process. When organisations do assign a singular purpose to ToCs, this tends to fall in the realm of evaluation, a point confirmed in a recent DFID-funded review.[31]

To further clarify the purpose of ToCs, some authors have created typologies.[32] Among the most useful is that provided by James.[33] While the author notes there is room for overlap between these categories, they nevertheless provide a useful starting point:

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[26] UNIFEM. (2010). UNIFEM Framework and Guidance Note for Capacity Development. Available at http://www.undp.md/employment/2010/50-100/092/Annex_2_UNIFEM_HQ_Capacity_Dev_Strategy_March_2010.PDF; DFID. (nd). Stabilisation Issues Note: Monitoring and Evaluation. Stabilisation Unit. Available at http://www.stabilisationunit.gov.uk/attachments/article/520/SIN%20Monitoring%20and%20Evaluation%2024022011%5B1%5D.pdf.; Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. (2011); Jones, H. (2011). A guide to monitoring and evaluating policy influence. ODI Briefing Note, (February); Ellis, J., Parkinson, D., & Wadia, A. (2011). Making Connections: Using a theory of change to develop planning and evaluation. *Charities Evaluation Services.*; Rogers (2012); GrantCraft (n.d.); Lederach, J. P., Culbertson, H., Darby, J., Fitzpatrick, B., & Hahn, S. (2007). Reflective Peacebuilding: A planning, monitoring, and learning toolkit. The Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame.; Lederach et al. (2007)

[27] OECD (2008); UNEG. (2011). Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality in Evaluation: Towards UNEG Guidance. Available at http://www.uneval.org/papersandpubs/documentdetail.jsp?doc_id=980.; UNDP. (2007). Evaluation of Results-Based Management at UNDP. Evaluation Office. Available at http://web.undp.org/evaluation/documents/thematic/RBM/RBM_Evaluation.pdf; Dart et al. (2010); Van Stolk, C., Ling, T. and Reding, A. (2011). Monitoring and evaluation in stabilisation interventions: Reviewing the state of the art and suggesting ways forward. RAND Europe, prepared for DFID Stabilisation Unit.

[28] Ellis et al. (2011)

[29] OECD (2008); Retolaza (2011)

[30] Keystone (2008)

[31] Vogel (2012)

[32] A useful typology is also provided by Duncan Green on his Oxfam blog, available at: http://www.oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/?p=9678.

[33] James (2011), p.7.

1. *Evaluative or formative*: "While many evaluation specialists find that theory of change is useful as it is a more formative approach, their emphasis from the beginning is on using theory of change for evaluation. Evaluation focused theory of change can also be prospective (designed from the beginning of a programme) or retrospective (carried out at the time of the evaluation to understand what has underpinned practice)"

2. *Explanatory or exploratory*: "Some approaches seek to make explicit – to explain – the existing theory for an organisation or programme in order to then learn and test whether it works. Others some set out to explore their theory from the outset without holding preconceptions."

3. *Linear or complex*: "some seek to lay out a very specific set of steps of cause and effect that can be tested at each level; while others seek to think about and represent theory of change from a more systemic or network perspective that reflects the complexity of change processes and shows the actors, chains, linkages and learning loops."

The nature of a particular ToC may depend upon the motivation and type of actor driving the ToC process. For DFID, ToC is used "to give an analytical explanation of the logic that underpins the results chain."[34] Fitting a ToC to a specific donor focus is different from Hivos' use of ToC as a 'conceptual tool'.[35] This highlights a tension that is rarely explored in the guidance literature: between ToC as both an externally imposed and internally driven process. Wigboldus and Brouwers note the importance of preventing the use of ToC a tool for "mechanical compliance with external requirements," as this is "exactly what a ToC articulation process is meant to overcome."[36] The "urge to be policy-relevant" may also deter investigation of "alternative sets of assumptions" about the change process.[37] Such omission, Weiss argues, may create conditions in which ToC approaches allow us "to know more but understand less."[38]

Key Issue: "Selling" a Theory of Change

There is a tension between ToC as an externally-imposed and as an internally-driven process. While some organisations may internally opt to undertake ToCs as a way to better rationalise their efforts, others may simply complete the process in response to donor demands. This can be problematic, as the need to use ToC to "sell" a programme may privilege the inclusion of donor requirements or politically preferable approaches in the ToC and in wider project planning. These approaches may ultimately supersede the concerns of the implementing organisation and/or the needs of the programme's intended beneficiaries.

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[34] DFID. (2012). Results in Fragile and Conflict Affected States and Situations, p.6. Available at http://www.dfid.gov.uk/documents/Publications1/managing-results-conflict-affected-fragile-states.pdf
[35] Though, again, both emphasise that ToC should provoke critical reflection.
[36] Wigboldus, S. and Brouwers, J. (2011). Rigid plan or vague vision: How precise does a ToC needs to be? Hivos E-dialogues. Available at http://www.hivos.nl/eng/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Themes/Theory-of-Change/E-dialogues/E-dialogue-2
[37] "End-users" are those who ought to benefit from justice and security arrangements in their everyday lives. The term suggests that people living in difficult places are not passive recipients. They are also a heterogeneous group, likely to be in conflict with each other, and might have very different views of what justice and security entails. This concept was developed as part of the JSRP Inception Phase Report (June 2012).
[38] Brodkin, Hass and Kaufam (1995), p.25, quoted in Weiss (1995), p.87.

Theory of Change Levels

There are a number of potential levels of analysis when thinking practically about social change, from the organisational to the societal, and from conceptualisation to implementation. Though interconnected, defining the level(s) at which a ToC approach is meant to function is crucial for the clarity and practicality of a given ToC and its associated intervention. This concept of levels is also useful in examining how a ToC functions within an organisation, as there may be an implementation ToC for a specific intervention as well as an organisational ToC to guide programming decisions.[39] James identifies a wide number of 'levels' for ToCs: there are "macro theories of change (development perspectives and thinking that influence us); sector or target group theories of change; organisational theories of change; and project or programme theories of change." [40]

For *implementation* ToCs, focusing on the project level of change will require attention to be paid to other levels that this project may affect. Multiple levels of change may also be explicitly linked within a single ToC or set of ToCs. One practical example of a multi-layered approach comes from UNIFEM, which specifically aims to create changes at the macro, meso, and micro-levels as part of a single ToC.[41] None of these approaches listed are mutually exclusive and often will necessarily be interdependent.

ToC levels within an *organisation* are also often interdependent. For example, it may be required to fit a country-level ToC under an overarching donor-level ToC.[42] Similarly, an organisation may wish to have coherent ToCs across their organisation and particular programme and project goals; it would make little sense for project level ToCs to operate independently from overarching organisational ones. Additionally, development organisations working in a particular area may wish to harmonise their ToCs to maximise the impact of their interventions.

Key Issue: Which level is appropriate for Theories of Change?

A clear problem highlighted by this review is that it is unclear what 'level' is appropriate for organisations to focus on, or whether ToCs should be done on all levels. What would it mean for a ToC to be done on 'all levels'? Doing so would presumably necessitate the creation of a unifying theory that takes into account all aspects of change associated with an intervention. This may be a near impossible task, but likewise, limiting a theory too much may render it one-dimensional. This issue has serious bearing on the plausibility of ToC as a concept.

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[39] Carol Weiss makes a useful distinction between implementation theory and program theory: the former is focused on how the program is carried out, whilst the latter focuses on the responses that the activities generate. See Weiss, C. H. (1997). Theory-based evaluation: Past, present, and future. New Directions for Evaluation, 1997(76), p. 46.
[40] James (2011), p.7.
[41] UNIFEM. (2010), p. 14.
[42] For issues associated with external donor requirements see 'The Purpose of Theory of Change' section in this document.

One way of understanding the concept of levels in ToC is to look at the actors and targets of the intended change process.[43] As Shapiro highlights, practitioners inevitably seem to target a specific actor-level as the starting point to conceptualise change:[44]

1. "Changing **individuals** involves strategies that shift attitudes and perceptions, feelings, behaviours and motivations of participants in an intervention."
2. "Programmes that focus on changing **relationships** often suggest that new networks, coalitions, alliances and other cooperative relationships between members of conflicting groups not only positively change the individuals directly involved, but can be a powerful force for fostering social changes that help resolve conflicts. These meso-level change strategies aim to effect both individuals and social structures."
3. **"Structural**, **institutional** and **systemic** changes are the primary focus for some conflict intervention programmes…These efforts are often directly aimed at legislative, electoral and judicial reform, establishing new mediating mechanisms and forums within society, economic development initiatives (e.g. micro-finance, job training) and infra-structure support for basic human necessities (e.g. water, food, health care)."

Lederach employs an understanding of the dimensions of change, relating to four dimensions of conflict: personal, relational, structural and cultural. [45] Identifying dimensions of change such as these can help organisations (and other interested parties) clarify and develop the kind of change they hope to achieve.

The Role of Key Concepts in Theory of Change

One problem identified in this review is the fuzzy use of language in ToC discussion. Terms such as 'theory', 'assumption', 'hypothesis' and 'linkages' are used fairly interchangeably without clear explanation. These terms lack clarity and often seem disconnected from their implications for broader social science work. This is important since how these terms are understood may change the way in which ToC is approached. Given their importance to the ToC discourse and to the JSRP-TAF collaboration, the role of the terms 'assumptions' and 'evidence' was identified as in need of deeper analysis.

Within certain key pieces of literature, ToC is seen as providing practitioners with an opportunity to engage more honestly with the complexity of change processes.[46] For some others, the ToC is seen more narrowly as extending the assumptions/risks column of a logical framework. As becomes clear below, clarification on the role of the above concepts is crucial if ToCs are able to accurately reflect the kinds of messy and unpredictable worlds they attempt to engage with. At its best, ToC requires an engagement with wider social science theory and research-based evidence. Such work is ultimately an attempt to describe and understand how change happens in the world, and this is central to those practitioners engaging with ToC. The extent of practitioner engagement with the above terms, and with social science theory and research, may well

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[43] This is briefly touched on in Duncan Green's blog post, see Green, D., From Poverty to Power Blog. Available at http://www.oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/?p=5864
[44] Shapiro (2006), p.5-6.
[45] For further explanation of dimensions of change as an applied concept, see Lederach, J.P. and Thapa, P. (2012) Staying True in Nepal: Understanding Community Mediation Through Action Research, *The Asia Foundation*.
[46] Retolaza (2011), p. 3; Green (2012)

reflect whether ToC approaches ultimately reveal or oversimplify the complexity of processes of change.

Assumptions

In reference to ToCs, assumptions are written about in a variety of ways in the literature. Assumptions are often referred to as the necessary conditions for change, or the "underlying conditions or resources that need to exist for planned change to occur."[47] CARE outlines various types of assumptions related to the underlying causes of the problem to be addressed, the role of each assumption in the change process, and the broader operational context of a programme.[48] An additional view on assumptions comes from Church and Rogers, who argue that assumptions outline both how change works and "the strategic advantage of the chosen theory over other theories for the context."[49]

Regardless of how assumptions are defined, identifying and questioning assumptions is generally seen as central to the process of articulating a ToC. Yet Church and Rogers highlight the overwhelming task of accurately identifying which assumptions are relevant to a given ToC.[50] Ruesga is highly critical of ToCs in this regard, claiming that it is impossible to decide which of all possible beliefs and assumptions will be critical to success.[51] Appreciating the difficulties inherent in this task is important, as ignoring them may encourage discussion of arbitrary assumptions or allow people to uncover only those assumptions that they are comfortable defending.

The concept of 'testing' an assumption is also prominent in the literature, though this is also problematic. There is a tension between the concept of testing assumptions and the dictionary definition of the word. If taken literally, once an 'assumption' is tested or substantiated in any meaningful way, it is no longer an assumption:

> "*Assumption:* Something taken for granted or accepted as true without proof; A supposition."[52]

This is not simply a semantic issue. Throughout the literature, the extent to which 'assumptions' should be tested is unclear, as are questions of how this is to be done, as well as whether it is enough simply to identify assumptions clearly. The fact that some literature also *defines* a ToC as an assumption – for example claiming that assumptions are the "'theories' in theory of change thinking"[53] – makes this even more confusing.

Weiss attempts to provide a measure of direction on this point, noting, "if good knowledge is already available on a particular point, then we can change its label from 'hypothesis' or 'assumption' to something closer to 'fact' and move along."[54] While this process of differentiating facts from hypotheses may ease both planning and evaluation by "rubber stamping" aspects of interventions, doing so also threatens to create a false

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[47] Ellis et al. (2011), p.1. Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance. (2010). Monitoring & Evaluation of Advocacy Campaigns: Literature Review, p.7.

[48] CARE (2012)

[49] Church and Rogers (2006), p.16.

[50] Church and Rogers (2006)

[51] Ruesga, G. A. (2010). Philanthropy's Albatross: Debunking Theories of Change. The Greater New Orleans Foundation, p.15.

[52] Webster's New World College Dictionary cited in Retolaza (2011), p. 24.

[53] Vogel (2012), p.17.

[54] Weiss (1995), p.70.

sense of rigour in ToCs. Assessing the plausibility of an assumption, either using strong theory or good evidence, remains a key challenge.

Perhaps most importantly, the confusion surrounding assumptions feeds directly into what people expect ToCs to achieve. If we take the term assumption literally, then ToC processes are simply about uncovering common beliefs, rather than critically interrogating them. Broad application of the term 'assumption' could encourage a superficial approach to ToC, rather than a nuanced attempt to engage with the complexity of change processes. In this respect, it is problematic that assumptions are always seen as central to ToC processes. If ToCs are to be taken as rigorous analytical pieces of work then the central element of them perhaps should not be something that may lend itself to shallow analysis.

Evidence

Clearly one way of making ToCs more robust is to link them to evidence, yet only a minority of the literature reviewed had an in-depth discussion of the use of evidence in ToCs. Indeed, the relationship between evidence, research findings, policy and practice has become a matter of lively debate. When does a research finding constitute evidence? Can other forms of evidence, such as the views of end users, be used as evidence? Under what circumstances can evidence inform policy? In the next section we examine the various ways in which evidence is understood in those parts of the ToC literature that discussed it at any length.

In reference to policy-making, Shaxson defines evidence as "information that helps to turn strategic priorities into concrete, manageable and achievable plans." [55] In relation to DFID funding, a Coffey paper states that an "evidence base would consist of a combination of quantitative and qualitative data focused on testing and proving a plausible theory of change." [56] James and Vogel highlight the importance of triangulating data from multiple sources including: academic (quantitative/qualitative), programme evaluation and available grey literature, stakeholder experience, and pilot experience. [57] Van Stolk et al. argue that the robustness of such data collection processes – the degree to which they are replicable, systematic, and considered legitimate to all stakeholders involved – is particularly important. [58]

When specifically considering ToC in stabilisation activities, Van Stolk et al. note that a strong evidence base will capture multiple dimensions of change, including social, economic, political and security dimensions. The authors further highlight the importance of grounding ToC in the "the perceptions and behaviour of local individuals and organisations," as these views are more "relevant than external views on progress." [59] This data, it is argued, may be best obtained through anthropological or sociological study and should be corroborated by a mixed methods approach.

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[55] Michael Harrison (n.d.) quoted in Shaxson, L. (2005): "Is your Evidence Robust Enough?", Evidence & Policy, 1(1):101-111, p.103.
[56] Coffey and DFID. (2012). Evaluation Manager PPA and GPAF : Evaluation Strategy, (February), p. 12
[57] Vogel (2012); Jones (2011)
[58] Van Stolk, et al. (2011), p.20.
[59] Van Stolk et al. (2011), p.22.

The extent to which these diverse forms of evidence are engaged with may well reflect the rigour with which a ToC is undertaken. These approaches to using evidence in ToCs range from practitioner experience to empirical social science work, neither of which features very strongly in the guidance literature. There is a clear tension between these often opposing approaches to ToC evidence. For example, if ToCs are to rely on practitioner experience alone, then it may be the case that ToC is good for making explicit 'lived evidence bases' but rather reductive for doing justice to serious social science work. Alternatively, over reliance on social science material may well result in a ToC that is divorced from the reality it is supposed to represent.

Key Issue: ToC and Evidence-Based Policy

Many donors both emphasise evidence-based policy and require ToCs from their grantees. While pairing these approaches may be a way to develop more rigorous policy and practice, in reality these seem to be headed on divergent courses. As undertakings such as DFID's Research for Development portal build databases of systematic evidence reviews, projects based on ToC often rely more on conceptualisation and narrative than evidence. Clearer ways of assessing the value of different forms of evidence, including formal research and lived experience, are also needed. Bridging the disconnect between many different approaches may require a more fully developed understanding of the role of evidence in ToC.

Social Science Theory

Social science theory may be useful in contextualising and understanding the evidence-base used for a ToC. According to Bronstein et al., the traditions of social science theory - including political economy, rights-based approaches, innovation theory and power analysis – may be useful to clarify "key points in theory of change thinking."[60] Similarly, Stachowiak argues that "knowing about and incorporating existing social science theories into our strategies can sharpen our thinking, provide new ways of looking at the policy world, and ultimately improve our theories of change."[61]

If ToCs are to engage with social science theories, it will be important that they understand, develop and critically assess these modes of analysis. These analytical perspectives and the worldviews they beget may be further informed by historical ideas that, although seemingly self-evident, have their roots in "western scientific and social science traditions." [62] Clearly, these perspectives will inherently contain certain assumptions which – if the role of assumptions in the literature is to be taken seriously – should also be uncovered and critically assessed. It is debatable whether this is a plausible undertaking; perhaps it would only make sense to identify key assumptions behind a particular analytical approach.

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[60] Bronstein et al. 2009, quoted in Vogel (2012), p. 19.
[61] Stachowiak, S. (2009). Pathways for Change: Theories about How Policy Change Happens. Change. Organizational Research Services. Available at http://www.organizationalresearch.com/publicationsandresources/pathways_for_change_6_theories_about_how_policy_change_happens.pdf, p. 1.
[62] Bronstein et al. 2009, quoted in Vogel (2012), p. 19.

Ideas About ToC Best Practice

This literature review has attempted to capture the characteristics that are said to comprise a successful ToC approach. Though different documents focused on differing elements, some useful criteria that emerged from the review are outlined below in terms of 'process' and 'content'.[63] The descriptions below are not intended to be templates for completing a ToC. Though it is clear that if ToCs are to be useful they will need to be comprehensive in some sense,[64] focusing on a list of criteria alone could draw users into a purely technical and isolated understanding of the ToC approach.

Process

It is commonly reflected in the literature that, "the process of developing a ToC is in itself is as much an objective as the product that results from it."[65] According to the documents reviewed, this process should be grounded in an *accurate* analysis of both the context of each intervention and an understanding of the role of the intervening party. This ensures both the *plausability*[66] of achieving the goal outlined in the ToC, and the extent to which this goal is *realistic*. Proper grounding will also ensure that the ToC is *useable* or *doable*, meaning that the resources, expertise, and external conditions necessary for change are identified and present.[67]

The process of articulating ToCs should allow for the participation of "a wide range of stakeholders,"[68] and should be based on a variety of forms of *rigorous evidence*, including local knowledge and experience,[69] past programming material and social science theory.[70] This process, it is argued, should also reveal the appropriate boundaries, scope, and level of complexity needed for each ToC.[71] Designated as an *iterative* process, ToC is intended to be an evolving tool, and a set of theories relevant to a specific setting, that is articulated, tested, and improved over time.[72] In this sense, ToC approaches facilitate learning not only through initial articulation, but also as a living embodiment of long-term best practice. DFID's guidelines provide a broader perspective, highlighting that ToCs should "draw on nationally-owned objectives and frameworks…each step tested with evidence particularly to support assumed behavioural changes; political economy analysis should also be deep and explicit."[73] Within this guidance, strong emphasis is placed on the importance of a thorough conflict (or structural) analysis in fragile situation as well as an investigation of the drivers of the conflict.[74]

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[63] Guijt and Retolaza (2012) make a useful distinction between process and content in ToC approaches.

[64] Guijt, and Retolaza (2012), p. 6.

[65] Wigboldus and Brouwers (2011). p.7.

[66] GrantCraft (n.d); Mackenzie, M. (2005). The Practice and the Theory: Lessons from the Application of a Theories of Change Approach. *Evaluation*, *11*(2), 151-168., p. 156.

[67] UNDP (2007), p.54.

[68] Coffey and DFID (2012), p.32.

[69] Vogel (2012), p.24.

[70] Jones (2011), p.5.

[71] Wigboldus and Brouwers (2011)

[72] Anderson, A. (2005). The Community Builder's Approach to Theory of Change. Washington DC: The Aspen Institute, p.13.

[73] DFID (2012), p.6.

[74] DFID (2012), p.10.; see also Lederach (2007).

Content

Table 1 below summarises the main components that the literature suggests are required for a comprehensive ToC approach. Identifying the 'why, what, who, when, and how' that link each element to the larger intervention may be a useful way of more fully understanding the change process.[75]

Table 1:

Summary Statement	One sentence describing the expected link between the intervention, the change process and the ultimate goal, often given as an "If…then…" statement.
Problem Statement	Identify the problem and examine its underlying causes
Overall Goal	Following from the problem statement, an identification of the goal to be achieved and how success will be identified[76]
Change Process	Identify the mechanism of change linking the inputs to short-term output/outcomes and long-term goal[77]
Change Markers	Identify milestones, indicators or other tools to assess/measure extent of change
Meta-Theory	Define the underpinning theory that justifies the chosen change process
Inputs	Actions intended to catalyse the change process and corresponding timeline for change
Actors	Identify the actors in the change process, define their roles and relationships
	- End-users / Intended beneficiaries[78]
	- Implementing actors
	- Spoilers
	- Points of collaboration with other agencies[79]
	- Additional external stakeholders
Domains of Change	If applicable, identify various strands or thematic areas that must be addressed in order to achieve the change, potentially articulated as sub-theories
Internal Risks	Identify potential impacts of the programme that may undermine its success
Assumptions	Identify beliefs, values, and unquestioned elements for each step of the change process
External Risks	Identify external risks to the programme with the potential to undermine its success and outline plans to overcome them
Obstacles to Success	Identify obstacles likely to threaten the change process and outline plans to overcome them[80]
Knock-On Effects	Identify the potential unintended consequences of the project, both positive and negative

Discussion

Though comprehensive, the criteria listed above fail to grasp some key issues when approaching ToC. While the following practical and conceptual considerations are not prominent in the central guidance literature, they stand out as a useful way to embed a ToC more deeply in its operational context.

Firstly, the 'best practice' criteria suggest that fully pursuing a ToC approach requires significant time and resources. Can these practices realistically be sustained over time? Doing so may be especially difficult for small organisations with limited time and resources. This may mean that the more arduous a ToC process, the more likely it is that large organisations alone will be able to engage with and learn from it.

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[75] Van Stolk et al. (2007), p.12.
[76] Vogel (2012), p. 15.
[77] Anderson (2005), p. 15; Retolaza (2011), p. 4; Vogel (2012), p. 15.
[78] Rogers (2012), p.3.
[79] Ellis et al. (2011), p. 4.
[80] DFID (nd), p. 5.

Secondly, what is the role of the end-user in aiding the understanding of the change process – and consequently, what is their role in the development of the ToC? Often the literature suggests that a variety of stakeholders need to be involved in the development of a ToC in order for it to be comprehensive.[81] Yet this notion of stakeholders is often vague and rarely mentions the intended 'beneficiaries' of programmes. Though directly involving these individuals in ToC development may be difficult or impractical, finding ways to foreground their views in thinking about the change processes may be an important way to ensure the strength of ToCs.[82]

Thirdly, to what extent is power analysis part of ToC approaches? Any change process in the social world will inherently engage with and run up against structures of power and interest. These structures, be they state apparatuses, social norms or economic patterns, have played a role in shaping current conditions and, along with the actors whose interests maintain them, may be barriers to change. As such, Hivos stress the importance of incorporating "power analysis about 'how change happens' and the forces at play that help or hinder" change into ToC approaches.[83] Eyben et al. reinforce this point, noting that "any model of societal change is political and value-laden" and should "understand and relate to the power relations" therein.[84] Though perhaps uncomfortable at times, grasping the reality of the political dimensions of development may ultimately allow for more effective programming that is more firmly grounded in local realities.

> **Key Issue: Accuracy, honesty and transparency in ToC approaches**
>
> The extent to which political and institutional concerns allow power to be honestly discussed, and end users to be involved in ToCs, is seldom addressed in the guidance literature. As international development is inherently political, organisations that honestly present their understanding of the change process may at times risk alienating partners and local communities, losing country access and endangering staff. The risk of failure may be viewed as too high by funders. This issue, as Weiss (1995:87) notes, is particularly significant when organisations must publicise their ToCs and reveal both their strategies and assumptions. Clearly this point relates to the larger tension between aid transparency and effectiveness; however, the extent to which these constraints impact interventions, the change process and the overall utility of ToC is worth considering.

Conclusion

By examining practitioner, expert and donor material, this literature review has outlined and analysed current thinking on ToC in the field of international development. Prominent concepts and common debates have been identified and critically assessed. Whilst this information may help inform future use of ToC approaches, it has also identified a number of difficulties facing those presented by guidance and other literature on the topic.

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[81] Guijt and Retolaza (2012)

[82] This point was initially made during a group discussion at the JSRP-TAF workshop.

[83] Guijt and Retolaza (2012), p. 6.

[84] Eyben, R., Kidder, T., Rowlands, J., & Bronstein, A. (2008). Thinking about change for development practice: a case study from Oxfam GB. Development in Practice, 18(2), 201-212, p. 209.

The points mentioned in *Key Issues* throughout this paper represent some of the many potential paths of future inquiry on this growing topic. Two prominent key issues are to think more about the role of the end user or 'beneficiary' in the ToC process, and the extent to which power analysis informs ToC approaches. In addition, there are problems raised by the confusion surrounding different approaches to ToC, the need to 'sell' a ToC, the appropriate level of a ToC and how accurate, honest and transparent a ToC can be. More fully exploring these issues with policy makers, donors, academics and end-users will hopefully encourage a stronger reflection on what a 'successful' ToC approach could look like, and how it can be used for improving development practice.

The JSRP-TAF collaboration will be undertaking its own field research to explore this final point. To date there has been little comprehensive documentation of ToC approaches and few constructive reviews of the extent to which ToCs for major projects are supported by evidence. By comparing ToCs currently in use to evidence generated by the organisations implementing them, wider social science knowledge and new primary research, the collaborative project will aim to critically interrogate existing theories, in the hope of strengthening the link between academic research and development practice.

Key papers/Further reading

From the reviews, James (2011) for Comic Relief and Vogel (2012) for DFID are of particular note. From the agency guidance documents, we recommend looking closely at Retolaza (2011) for Hivos, as well as CARE (2012) on ToCs and peacebuilding. From the donor literature, further analysis is required of the OECD (2008) DAC guidance, Coffey's (2012) Evaluation Strategy, the NONIE (2003) guidance and DFID (2012) on conflict-affected situations.

As the 'buzz' around Theory of Change has grown, so has the number of those offering expertise on how to tackle the process. Church and Rogers (2006) is a very useful paper, as is Shapiro (2006). Specifically on peacebuilding, Lederach et al. (2007) provide a helpful toolkit. For the most popular ToC guidelines, see the work of Actknowledge[85] and Keystone (2008).

Some of the most interesting discussion of Theory of Change is taking place online.[86] One useful resource is on Hivos's website,[87] which includes a section on criticisms of Theory of Change, as well as some of Hivos' E-dialogues which were reviewed in this document.[88] Useful discussion of ToCs can often be found on Duncan Green's 'From Poverty to Power' blog for Oxfam.

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[85] ActKnowledge website (2012) and The Aspen Institute and ActKnowledge (2003)
[86] For lists of resources on Theory of Change see:
http://philanthropy411.wordpress.com/2010/03/29/theoryofchange/;
http://www.researchtoaction.org/theory-of-change-useful-resources/
[87] http://www.hivos.nl/eng/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Themes/Theory-of-Change/
[88] http://www.hivos.nl/eng/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Themes/Theory-of-Change/E-dialogues

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Annex 1: Typology of Purpose

Thinking	Theoretical conceptualisation of all stages[89]
	Create wider understanding of how/why change occurs[90]
	Examine underlying assumptions and habits
Planning[91]	Identify useful interventions[92]
	Identify measurable research questions[93]
	Identify target population[94]
	Request/Justify funding decisions[95]
	Anticipate/Manage potential negative impacts[96] and risks[97]
Implementation	Guide ad-hoc decisions[98]
	Guide management[99]
Monitoring and Evaluation[100]	Impact assessment[101]
	Test if contextual conditions are accounted for[102]
	Meta-evaluation to further refine theory[103]
	Test theory/assumptions against realities[104]
	Develop meaningful indicators[105]
	Formative and summative evaluation[106]
	Contribute to best practices[107]
Learning[108]	Engages staff[109]
	Establishes shared understanding of goals across disciplines[110]
	Encourages a culture of learning and analysis[111]
	Facilitates communication with external stakeholders[112]
	Draw on external knowledge[113]

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[89] GrantCraft (n.d); Dart et al. (2010)
[90] DfID (n.d). Stabilisation Issues Note: Monitoring and Evaluation
[91] UNIFEM (2010); Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance. (2010)
[92] USAID 2010:4; Rogers (2012); Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (2011)
[93] International Network on Strategic Philanthropy. (2005). Theory of Change Tool Manual.
[94] Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (2011)
[95] GrantCraft (nd)
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[98] USAID (2010)
[99] Ellis et al. (2011)
[100] DfiD (nd); UNEG (2011)
[101] GrantCraft (n.d); UNDP (2007)
[102] Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance. (2010)
[103] USAID (2010:6)
[104] OECD (2008)
[105] USAID (2010:4)
[106] USAID (2010:4)
[107] Ellis et al. (2011)
[108] Keystone (2008)
[109] USAID (2010:4)
[110] Dart et al. (2010)
[111] GrantCraft (n.d)
[112] USAID (2010); The Aspen Institute and ActKnowledge (2003)
[113] James (2011)

Annex 2: Literature Review Question Template

<u>**Citation**</u>:	
<u>**Summary:**</u>	
<u>**Concepts:**</u>	a. Theory of Change
	b. ToC rationales i.e. The purpose of having/making a ToC
	c. Assumptions
	d. Linkage (or synonym thereof)
	e. Evidence
<u>**Typologies:**</u>	a. Theory (e.g. implementation or programmatic theory; sub/meta theory)
	b. Evidence, as used within ToC processes (e.g. retrospective or prospective)
	c. Applications of ToC (e.g. for planning, evaluation, appraisal etc.)
<u>**Causality**</u>	Does the document mention contribution analysis, attribution or additionality? If so, how?
<u>**Other**</u>	Characteristics of a 'good' theory of change

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Video Journalism Movement (Netherlands)

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