on*trac*

Theory of Change: what's it all about?

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The development sector is buzzing with another 'new' idea: Theory of Change. Proponents believe that Theories of Change will reform the way that organisations plan for and assess their development efforts. Increasing pressure from organisations' boards and funders to articulate long-term impact has encouraged many to look for new and better ways to represent what they do. Many funders, organisational development providers and consultants are using Theory of Change to help NGOs focus more directly on long-term change rather than project-focussed outputs and outcomes, and to help them to direct their energies more clearly. The result is a rush of organisations eager to jump on the Theory of Change bandwagon. Requests for training and support on this have never been greater.

Theories of Change have much to recommend them. If the process is developed well, with full stakeholder engagement, they have the potential to ensure shared planning and understanding of organisation and

programme goals; a rigorous testing of assumptions made when planning and implementing development interventions; improved accountability and learning; and the provision of a high level communication and marketing tool.

However, if they are developed at head office level in response to a donor requirement (as is increasingly the case), they risk being an expensive waste of time and resources. Developing a Theory of Change is not a quick fix; rather it is a long-term change process that requires substantial investment in terms of staff time, commitment and resources. The examples from Concern Universal and SAVI contained in this issue demonstrate this well. Therefore ensuring institutional buy-in at all levels is essential to ensuring success.

So, when and why did Theories of Change emerge? What exactly are they? How do they complement other processes for planning and assessing impact? And, not least, how can they be used to ensure more effective development?

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This issue of ONTRAC looks at 'Theory of Change': another 'new' idea that has become increasingly popular in the development sector in recent years. Maureen Flynn first provides an overview of Theories of Change – what they are; how and why they were developed; how they relate to other methods of assessing impact; and how they can support effective development. The articles that follow then address experiences and applications of Theories of Change across differing contexts.

James Treasure-Evans outlines the development of Concern Universal's Theory of Change, and the challenges and benefits that they found during the process. Stephen Fraser, writing about the experiences of the SAVI programme in Nigeria, emphasises how developing a Theory of Change can help programmes to retain a focus on processes.

Duncan Green provides an alternative approach to developing a theory of social change, describing how an Oxfam programme in Tanzania took on an evolutionary acceleration approach to its work on accountability. Finally, Isabel Vogel reports on the interesting results of a DFID-commissioned review of people's experience with Theory of Change.

When and why were they developed?

Although people have long explored theories of social change, the concept of 'Theory of Change' first emerged in the mid-1990s in response to the challenge of assessing the impact of complex social development programmes. Carol Weiss – author of the first publication on Theory of Change – argued that the impact of these programmes was difficult to assess because the assumptions that inspired them were poorly articulated and stakeholders were unclear about how the change process would unfold. Consequently little attention was paid to the sequence of changes necessary for a longer term goal to be reached. This lack of clarity not only made the task of evaluating a complex initiative challenging; it also reduced the likelihood that all of the important factors related to the long-term goal would be addressed. Weiss popularised the term 'Theory of Change' as a way to describe the set of assumptions that explain both the steps that lead to the long-term goal and the connections between programme activities and outcomes that occur at each step of the way.

What are they?

Theories of Change can be set at organisational levels, programme levels and even project levels. Although there are endless variations in terms of style and content, the basic components include a big picture analysis of how change happens in relation to 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. They are often illustrated in diagrammatic form, accompanied by some explanatory notes.

How do they complement other processes for planning and assessing the impact of organisational efforts?

There is no one clear answer to this question because different organisations use the process in different ways. Typically, Theories of Change:

- show a causal pathway by specifying what is needed for goals to be achieved

- require the articulation of underlying assumptions which can be tested and measured

- change the way organisations think about implementation strategies, by encouraging them to focus not so much on what is being done, but on what needs to be changed.

How can they support more effective development?

There is so much potential with Theory of Change. If developed and used effectively, it can be used:

- as a framework to check progress towards change (to complement project logic) and to stay on course

- to test the weak links in the change pathway (right people? right strategies? right outcomes?)

- to document lessons learnt about what really changes in relation to our efforts

- to keep the process of implementation, and impact assessment transparent, so everyone knows what changing and how

- to report more effectively to funders, policymakers and boards.

The time is ripe for organisations to invest time and energy in exploring what is involved in developing a Theory of Change; and analysing how it might benefit their planning and impact assessment processes. The process is at a cusp – we need to ensure that the value of Theories of Change is not eroded by fashionable reductionism.

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INTRAC training

NEW COURSE!

Theory of Change

8-10 October 2012

Donors are increasingly requiring grantees to provide a Theory of Change to accompany their proposals. Those organisations who have already developed a Theory of Change have found that the process and the product can provide greater clarity for communication, planning and M&E; enhance partner relationships and support organisational development.

This course gives participants a solid understanding of what Theories of Change are; how they complement other planning processes; and how they can be applied to organisations and to programmes. The course will build participants' skills in developing a Theory of Change for their own organisation or programme, and allows them to experiment with developing elements of a Theory of Change.

Objectives of the course

After the course, participants will:

- be able to describe what Theories of Change involve and include and the rationale for using them

- be able to identify how and when they should be developed and how they inform and complement other planning and M&E tools

- have increased confidence in working through the steps and processes involved in developing Theories of Change

- have explored ways to promote and develop robust Theories of Change within their own organisation and have developed an action plan for applying the learning.

Visit **www.intrac.org/pages/en/training.html** for more information.

Developing an organisational Theory of Change: Concern Universal's experience

As management guru Peter Drucker once stated, the challenge of strategic level change is to combine 'doing things well' (greater efficiency) with 'doing the right things' (increased effectiveness). Developing a Theory of Change has been one part of our wider ongoing journey to better understand what we do and why we do it.

There were three basic drivers behind Concern Universal developing a Theory of Change. Firstly, some of our country programmes were already developing country level theories and there was an internal push to have an organisational level Theory of Change. Secondly, our main funding partners had begun asking us to explain our Theory of Change. Finally, we saw developing a Theory of Change as a useful tool for a mid-term review of our organisational strategy.

Developing our Theory of Change

It took us seven months to develop our Theory of Change. Making the most of a strategy review meeting attended by staff from across Concern Universal, we set time aside for an introductory Theory of Change workshop. The workshop sought buy-in and understanding for the process and allowed us to explore what a Theory of Change is and how it can be used.

During the workshop we formed a working group to lead the process, comprising UK and in-country staff. Their first task was to develop a paper on poverty and vulnerability, helping us to think through the processes of social change.

The paper explored the underlying causes of poverty and vulnerability; how does (social) change happen, how does our work promote change, and how can we incorporate change into programme planning? The poverty paper and organisational strategy formed the basis of our discussions throughout the process of developing our Theory of Change.

The Theory of Change went through several iterations as drafts were commented on by colleagues across the organisation. It was based on the principles of our organisational strategy, starting with the main challenges facing people living in poverty and fini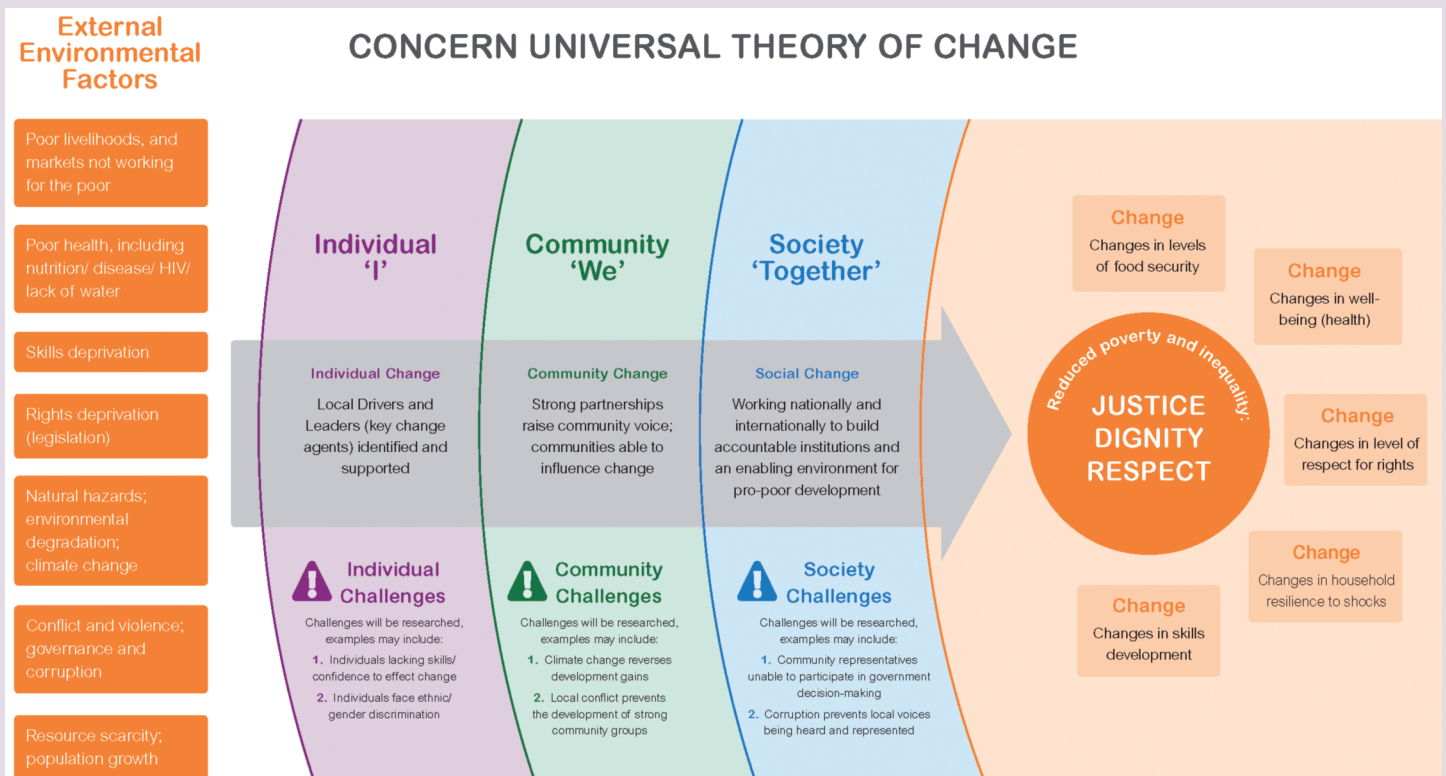shing with our vision – a world where justice, dignity and respect prevails for all. But where the Theory of Change differs from our strategy is that it focuses on how our vision can be attained; in other words the pathway to change.

Once we had a Theory of Change it took much longer than expected to decide on its graphical representation. The design process brought up a number of fundamental issues and we almost ended up going back to the drawing board. While putting the final design in place we wrote up brief explanatory notes.

We had originally envisaged that the background paper on poverty would be enough of a guide to the paper but actually the explanatory notes have proved the more useful tool and now form an integral part of the Theory of Change.

Challenges

The greatest challenge that we faced as we developed the Theory of Change was securing the commitment of colleagues to the process. This was partly because colleagues were busy

CONCERN UNIVERSAL THEORY OF CHANGE

External Environmental Factors

Poor livelihoods, and markets not working for the poor

Poor health, including nutrition/ disease/ HIV/ lack of water

Skills deprivation

Rights deprivation (legislation)

Natural hazards; environmental degradation; climate change

Conflict and violence; governance and corruption

Resource scarcity; population growth

Individual 'I'

Individual Change
Local Drivers and Leaders (key change agents) identified and supported

Individual Challenges
Challenges will be researched, examples may include:
1. Individuals lacking skills/ confidence to effect change
2. Individuals face ethnic/ gender discrimination

Community 'We'

Community Change
Strong partnerships raise community voice; communities able to influence change

Community Challenges
Challenges will be researched, examples may include:
1. Climate change reverses development gains
2. Local conflict prevents the development of strong community groups

Society 'Together'

Social Change
Working nationally and internationally to build accountable institutions and an enabling environment for pro-poor development

Society Challenges
Challenges will be researched, examples may include:
1. Community representatives unable to participate in government decision-making
2. Corruption prevents local voices being heard and represented

Reduced poverty and inequality:
JUSTICE DIGNITY RESPECT

Change
Changes in levels of food security

Change
Changes in well-being (health)

Change
Changes in level of respect for rights

Change
Changes in household resilience to shocks

Change
Changes in skills development

with country level priorities, and because not everyone within the organisation was convinced that a Theory of Change would add anything that wasn't already outlined in our organisational strategy. Some questioned the value of the Theory of Change as a strategic planning tool.

Now that we have the Theory of Change everyone can see how it relates to their work. However, we also recognise that the full benefits of the approach – as a planning tool and leading to improvements in project design – will only be fully achieved when we develop country and project level Theories of Change.

Benefits

We believe we will be able to use the Theory of Change in many ways: as a means to explain to donors what we do and how we learn; as a reference point by in-country teams to develop country programme (or project) Theories of Change; as an aide memoire in project planning; and in setting more specific terms of reference for impact assessments.

Since developing the organisational Theory of Change two country programmes have already developed country level Theories of Change and have begun to use the Theory of Change tool in project planning.

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Concern Universal is an international development organisation tackling poverty from the grassroots.

We create opportunities for people around the world to improve their lives and shape their own futures. By building skills and connecting people at all levels in society, we help communities deliver practical solutions with long-term impact.

www.concern-universal.org/theory

The importance of process: developing a Theory of Change for a DFID-funded programme

SAVI is a six-year programme providing technical support to strengthen relations between citizens and government in Nigeria through supporting civil society, the media and Houses of Assembly in selected states. Like many DFID-funded programmes, it has recently come under increased pressure to show results.

However, with the growing pressure for results there is a danger that the processes by which they are achieved get overlooked. SAVI's experience demonstrates that developing a Theory of Change can help programmes to retain a focus on processes.

When the programme began in 2008 the big question then was how we were going to get results. We started by developing the programme logframe as a tool to help us plan, coordinate, monitor and report activities and results from a process perspective. Indicators and baselines were established based on our analysis of what was most likely to drive change in each state: our initial Theory of Change. Since we didn't know for sure what would and wouldn't work, we aimed to use our logframe to track the process to inform the development of this Theory.

Results for us were thus framed both in terms of immediate, tangible outcomes and impacts, for example changes in government policy; but also longer-term systemic changes, for example stronger platforms for collective action, which measure the extent of local ownership, sustainability and replicability of those processes that worked.

However, with the increased pressure DFID is under to communicate results, SAVI's logframe has been gradually reduced to a series of indicators and numbers emphasising short-term results and struggles to tell the story of how they were achieved or what the implications are for their sustainability

and replicability. Consequently, SAVI has had to develop a second programme planning framework based on its Theory of Change, separate from but linked to the logframe, which focuses on the processes for achieving sustainable, long-term results.

How we went about it

SAVI staff try to practice what they preach: empowerment and accountability through collective responsibility. SAVI's current Theory of Change is the product of more than three years of regular meetings of all our state teams, guided and supported by a central team of advisers and specialists.
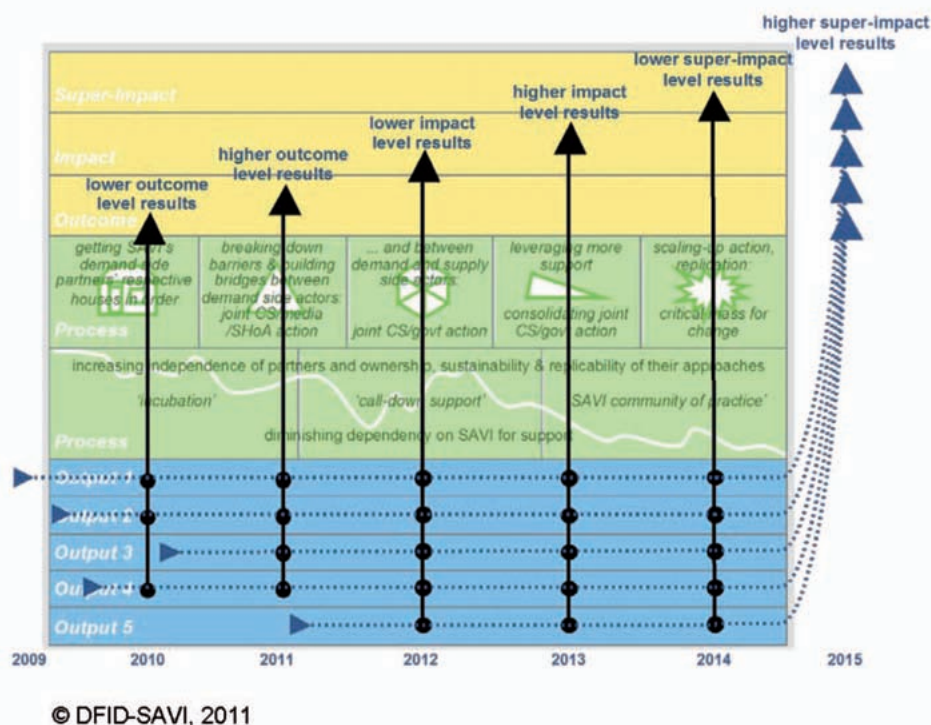
SAVI's Theory of Change is not static but ever evolving. It was nearly a year into the programme before it really took shape. By pooling the previous experience of all the staff; looking at theoretical frameworks used by other similar programmes; combining these with contextual analysis of each selected state; and finding areas of common ground, we were eventually able to reach consensus on a broad, basic framework that articulated a Theory of Change that was to everyone's satisfaction.

With each annual review, both Theory and framework have been revisited, challenged and further improved. And as the logframe has become increasingly less accommodating, so the Theory of Change's own framework has taken on a whole life and importance of its own. Consequently, it now barely resembles the initial basic form that emerged in 2009. However, close inspection reveals that each stage of its development has provided a foundation for the next.

The challenges and benefits

Though the benefits clearly outweigh the challenges, the process of developing SAVI's Theory of Change has not been

How the programme's broad theory of change (in green) relates to its logical results framework (SAVI=state accountability and voice initiative, CS=civil society, SHoA=state house of assembly).

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Evolutionary acceleration: an alternative theory of change

'Theories of Change' are all the rage in development circles, but like many such 'fuzzwords', the meaning of the term is rather plastic. For some, it means little more than an upgraded 'logical framework' setting out project plans in terms of a linear sequence of activities, outputs and intended outcomes against which a project can be monitored, evaluated and judged.

But theories of change offer a much more exciting possibility: helping NGOs and other actors chart a course through the uncertainties and lack of linearity that in development (as in life) are more the rule than the exception. This article provides an example from Tanzania, where Oxfam is applying a theory of change based on evolutionary theory to its work on accountability, with some promising results.

Evolutionary acceleration in practice

Chukua Hatua (Take Action) does what it says on the tin. The programme is testing different approaches through a series of pilots to learn which can best act as a catalyst for Tanzanians to claim their rights. What's innovative about this is that Chukua Hatua explicitly uses a model of evolutionary acceleration, which is built on evolution's core process of variation-selection-amplification.[1]

In the first phase (variation), the programme sets lots of different hares running, namely:

- Election promises tracking
- Farmer animators
- Active musicians
- Student councils
- Community radio

easy. A lot of sweat and tears have gone into trying to:

- reach consensus among the staff on a form that meets all their needs and expectations, and helps them translate theory into practice

- gain acceptance of the need to adjust strategy, even direction, in response to lessons learnt and improvements with use – many staff are used to following a blueprint, not developing one as they go along

- explain to others why SAVI's approach and goalposts seem to keep shifting

- communicate the Theory of Change in a way that makes it broad enough to be applicable to a wide range of settings, yet tangible enough to be well understood.

However, over time this has become easier and SAVI's Theory of Change has become increasingly valued.

- Planned activities are becoming more strategic and justifiable.

- Monitoring and reporting of activities and outcomes is more now efficient and effective.

- Measuring the effectiveness of steps taken by local partners to strengthen inclusive governance is progressively becoming 'smarter'.

- Communication of SAVI's achievements is generally improving, strengthening the likelihood of replication of bits or whole processes by new and existing SAVI state teams and other local development practitioners.

The unexpected overarching challenge of having to develop a supplementary planning framework separate from the logframe to support programme management of the processes SAVI is piloting to develop our Theory of Change, has been a huge task, though not a regrettable one. It has in fact served to further highlight the importance of process to the programme and all its partners.

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In addition to the pilots, Oxfam also supported local campaigns where communities were already active, most notably in Ngorongoro.[2]

It then selects (or allows natural selection, as projects multiply or die of their own accord) the 'fittest' variants. Last September, a year into the project, came the difficult bit – killing off the less successful experiments.

Working with partners, a couple of other NGOs, the programme consultants, and KPMG (which manages the programme for DFID), we came up with criteria on which to judge the pilots:

- How much were they spreading awareness?

- How successful were they in mobilising people to take action?

- How responsive was the government (either local or national)?

Overall, the farm animators came out best. The musicians were better at awareness raising and mobilisation, but failed to get a good government response. We dropped some pilots and merged others. The student council approach was dropped and spun off to another funder.

The final phase will be amplification: creating an enabling environment for the selected initiatives and promoting synergies between them, but otherwise staying out of the way so that new ideas and approaches bubble up from the grassroots. Think venture capitalism (fund 10 start-up companies, hoping that one goes big, even if the others flop), but without the bottom line.

What didn't work and why?

- Geography: The active musicians were not able to work well because the communities were too widely dispersed to reach.

- Government obstruction: The

community radio never got off the ground because the government did not issue a licence.

- Informal verses formal power: The farmer animators' work was unsuccessful in spreading awareness beyond the groups that the animators belonged to. This might have been due to their lack of a 'formal' position in community leadership.

- Attitudes to youth: Students were able to make demands within their schools, but were unable to take this approach into the community as there was simply not enough respect for young people's viewpoints.

Apart from the shake-out of pilots, a number of other issues have emerged:

- The programme needs to do more to prepare for negative responses including introducing training in negotiation skills and conflict resolution and linking citizens and partners to national human rights defence organisations.

- In Tanzania, building 'created spaces' is much harder than helping citizens make better use of existing 'invited spaces' for consultation and accountability. The main obstacle here is often lack of capacity, so the next phase will continue to work with local elected leaders so they are more likely to support citizens' demands, and become a key ally in taking citizens' issues upwards to central government.

- Although there have been some notable successes, gender bias in Tanzania is very entrenched and work with women needs to be strengthened, especially looking at women's leadership, men's attitudes to women and women's participation in public spaces.

Importance of power analysis

Perhaps most interesting is the wider impact on how Oxfam is working in Tanzania. The team is getting much more expert in understanding who has power at the local level, and in the next phase will involve key local players such as faith leaders, traditional birth attendants and healers, and even the village militias.

Last word to programme coordinator Jane Lonsdale:

"I can't differentiate programming from power analysis – they go hand in hand. We're doing something different now, not just rolling out a load of community scorecards, or public expenditure tracking – the usual kind of governance work.

"We're pushing ourselves to really think through how change happens in Tanzania and try out different things. The whole team and partners are now talking in terms of power analysis. We've got the same language to describe what change looks like. Everyone is picking up trends and patterns – it's a lot better than conventional indicators."

Duncan Green
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Notes

1. See **www.oxfamblogs.org/fp2p /?p=5384** for more details.

2. See **www.oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/?s= jane+lonsdale&x=0&y=0** for more details.

Prove it, improve it, innovate it: what will you get when you work with Theory of Change in your programme?

Against the competing pressures of the results agenda, recognition of the complex realities of development work and growing emphasis of working in collaboration with local actors, institutions and local capacities in developing countries, some are questioning whether the Theory of Change approach can really help.

To shed light on this debate DFID commissioned a review of people's experience with Theory of Change. DFID has been working formally with Theory of Change as an approach to designing and commissioning programming since 2010. The purpose of the review was to learn from other people how they work with Theory of Change, identifying areas of consensus, debate and innovation in order to inform a more consistent approach within DFID.

Although Theory of Change is mainly seen as an evaluation tool ('prove it') and a great tool for visioning and planning ('improve it'); many people highlighted that its real potential lies in sparking innovation.

I spoke to 40 people from 25 development organisations, including donor agencies, NGOs and research and training organisations. What was really interesting was that so many different kinds of organisations have found Theory of Change an accessible, intuitive and useful approach to engage strategic thinking and learning for programme development, as well as for evaluation.

The most surprising finding was that although Theory of Change is mainly seen as an evaluation tool ('prove it') and a great tool for visioning and planning ('improve it'); lots of people highlighted that its real potential lies in sparking innovation.

By encouraging people to explore their assumptions and worldviews, and focus on what is happening in the context in an ongoing way, people find they get more ideas, it inspires new ways of working and it encourages them to look at what is going on around their programme as they implement it. New opportunities can be spotted and responded to while there is still time to improve.

In this way, programmes are able to adapt, innovate and improve their potential to achieve meaningful and lasting positive change to support people in developing countries.

What creates the sparks?

'Theory of Change' as an approach is not new. Its methodological credentials come from a well-established history in evaluation and programme theory, but it also draws on long traditions of informed action, participation and reflective practice for social change.

Most guidelines on Theory of Change say that you need to 'make your assumptions explicit', but people indicated that this is not easy to do in practice. The blending of both traditions in the current evolution of Theory of Change means that in practice, working with Theory of Change often prompts a deeper reflective (and self-reflexive) analysis than people expect.

Assumptions are the 'rules of thumb' and ways of seeing the world that we all use unconsciously to guide what we do. Sometimes, not exploring these means that we revert to 'business as usual', comfort zones get hard-wired into ways of working, and we can miss clues as to what could really make the difference in this context, for these people, today.

Theory of Change encourages us to start with the context, who we want to support and why. It says that different views are valuable and it is necessary to bring these out, compare them and not try to make them all the same.

We need to ask ourselves difficult questions about the world, and keep using different ways of looking at it if we are to spot new ideas and opportunities and create a strong initiative.

Through comparing different views, Theory of Change unlocks positive critical thinking about the things that people care deeply about: their work; who they want to benefit; and how and why their organisation is going to set about improving a situation. This deep reflection in a Theory of Change process often brings a clarity of thinking and insight, a real boost of energy and motivation; what people call 'aha moments'.

Keeping the 'aha' moments going

The most important question that people posed was: "The Theory of Change workshop was great, but how do you keep it going?"

The key message was to not to try to introduce a detailed process from the top down, but to work with the opportunities as they arise. Theory of Change thinking is a habit of thinking, not a product. A lot of benefit can be gained from simply starting to think more broadly about change and the realities of the context, and the people we want to support, before diving into thinking about activities.

Theory of Change thinking should evolve, it does not need to be developed in one go. Assumptions take time to become clearer and so an iterative, staged process that is integrated into other learning and planning processes can help to develop an outcomes-oriented outlook and build the confidence to apply Theory of Change principles and thinking at different levels and settings.

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INTRAC training

Impact Assessment

11-13 June 2012   Location: Oxford
Course fee: £595 non-residential/£745 residential

This course explores some of the different approaches to impact assessment that can be used by NGOs; the value of planning for impact; and how to build impact assessment into existing structures and systems. It also offers an opportunity to experiment with a number of tools and methods, and with how to use findings for organisational learning.

Child Rights-Based Approaches

11-13 June 2012   Location: Oxford
Course fee: £595 non-residential/£745 residential

This course provides participants with a clear understanding of how to use a child rights-based approach to develop and implement projects and programmes that contribute to improvements in children's enjoyment of their rights to participation, protection, survival and development. The course will cover a range of areas including understanding childhoods, human rights and children's rights principles and provisions, using UN Conventions to achieve change for children, understanding and applying a human rights-based approach to development in different contexts and cultural settings and identifying ways in which participants and their organisations can implement child rights in their own work practices.

Advocacy and Policy Influencing

25-29 June 2012   Location: Oxford
Course fee: £1045 non-residential/£1295 residential

This course gives participants a thorough understanding of how to influence the policy making process in their own context to achieve policy change. You will learn skills to help you plan and deliver effective advocacy strategies; enhance your ability to lobby decision makers; and gain confidence in the ways in which you relate to different audiences. You will also have a more thorough understanding of power dynamics in an advocacy context.

Advanced Monitoring and Evaluation

2-6 July 2012   Location: Oxford
Course fee: £1045 non-residential/£1295 residential

This course gives participants a thorough understanding of how to influence the policy making process in their own context to achieve policy change. You will learn skills to help you plan and deliver effective advocacy strategies; enhance your ability to lobby decision makers; and gain confidence in the ways in which you relate to different audiences. You will also have a more thorough understanding of power dynamics in an advocacy context.

Monitoring and Evaluation (Foundation)

10-14 September 2012   Location: Oxford
Course fee: £1045 non-residential/£1295 residential

M&E is an essential component of international NGOs, NGOs and civil society organisations striving to continually improve their work and have greater accountability. Given the high demand in the sector, this foundation course is designed to develop individuals' understanding of what M&E entails, why it is so vital, and how to do it well and in a participatory way. This course ensures that those who are new to M&E have a thorough understanding of M&E concepts and have built up the practical skills and the confidence needed to do M&E effectively. Participants will learn to use a range of M&E tools and activities that will help them improve accountability, learning and effectiveness of projects and programmes.

Gender Analysis and Planning

18-20 September 2012   Location: Oxford
Course fee: £595 non-residential/£745 residential

Development planners and NGOs are increasingly committed to incorporating a gender perspective into their programmes. However, many face challenges in its practical and systematic application to their work. This course will enable you to effectively and systematically analyse contexts and plan development and humanitarian programmes from a gender equality perspective.

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