Discussion Paper 3/2014

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Theory of Change in Development Cooperation.

Work in progress[1]

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List of abbreviations

CSO   Civil society organization

DAM   Dynamic Assumption Management

INGO   International non-governmental organization

M&E   Monitoring and Evaluation

ToC   Theory of Change

It is not enough to identify a problem and propose a solution. The solution must be put into practice before learning can occur. This raises the interesting issue about the relationship between organisational and individual learning.

Learning in Development Co-operation – an Introduction (Jerker Carlsson and Lennart Wohlgemuth)

1.   Overview of key approaches to Theory of Change

In recent years Theory of Change (ToC) approach, both as a linear planning tool (product) as well as a non-linear navigation chart (process), is slowly but steadily spreading within the International Development Cooperation community. Among other reasons, this responds to the need of showing more clearly how development cooperation organisations (mainly national NGOs in the South and (I)NGOs in the North) contribute effectively and efficiently to the changes they say they want to contribute to. Partly because donors demanding so fund them; and partly because civil society organisations need to understand better the role and contribution of these non-governmental organisations. But this is happening also because many of these organisations are constantly trying to improve their performance and contribution to social change by adjusting their thinking-action to the ever-changing and emerging context (adaptive management).

Who is using Theory of Change?

ToC is used in different places, by different actors, and for different and similar purposes. Some early applications, which have inspired later ones, come from American philanthropy[3] and other supporting organisations (Kellogs Foundation, Annie Casey, Rockefeller Foundation, Ford Foundation, ActKnowledge[4], etc.). European INGOs have adopted ToC a bit later and are still adapting and becoming more acquainted with the tool (Hivos[5], ICCO, Oxfam, ActionAid, Trocaire, Amnesty, etc.). Bilateral and multilateral donors are also becoming increasingly interested in the approach (SIDA, DFID[6], DANIDA, AECID, etc.). There are also reports of South-based NGOs using the approach in Africa, Latin America and Asia. ToC is also used in conflict

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[3]http://www.aspeninstitute.org/sites/default/files/content/docs/roundtable%20on%20community%20chang e/rcccommbuilderpproach.pdf

[4] see www.theoryofchange.org

[5] see http://www.hivos.net/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Themes/Theory-of-Change

[6] see http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/pdf/outputs/mis_spc/DFID_ToC_Review_VogelV7.pdf

transformation and peace-building[7] contexts/processes for some time now (CARE, Notre Dame University, Interpeace, CRS, etc.).

In conclusion, there is an increasingly ample use of the approach, which gives us the chance for lots of learning and cross-fertilizing.

How is Theory of Change being used?

As noted before, different actors use it in different ways and for different purposes. It is being used as a linear semi-structured planning tool for project implementation as well as a non-linear strategic navigation chart for supporting wider social change processes. Broadly speaking, the former is based on non-contradictory linear thinking and the latter in complex non-linear thinking. I will come back to this later on.

Theory of Change may be based on unilateral thinking-action developed by one sole organisation for internal use (i.e. organisational change project) or else can be a multi-lateral meeting point for a group of organisations (networks, partnerships, multi-stakeholder platforms, etc.) sharing the same interest/goal but approaching it from different perspectives and actions. In this case, it could be part of a supranational effort (i.e. regional programs) or a multi-stakeholder national initiative (awareness campaigns, rights advocacy projects, etc.). In the case of multi-lateral supranational initiatives, a broad Theory of Change can be used as a general umbrella for joint actions. Subsequently, each of the partners can develop its own ToCshaping the action of this particular organisation but always linked and articulated to the broad multi-lateral Theory of Change. It may also be used for a very concrete short-term project or else for a long-term initiative.

As we can see, the use and understating of ToC is wide and ample. All in one, there is not a "right" way of using it, and there shouldn't be one. Reality is quiet complex and demands different and alternative uses of ToC depending on the situation. Therefore, the use of ToC is context-based and there is no blueprint for its "right" use. The "trick" lies on choosing the right approach considering the purpose of the initiative and the concrete situation in which actors involved find themselves. This metaskill of choosing and implementing the most effective approach is achieved through reflective practice, accumulated experience, intuition, and common sense.

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[7]http://www.careinternational.org.uk/research-centre/conflict-and-peacebuilding/155- peacbuilding-with-impact-defining-theories-of-change; http://www.crsprogramquality.org/publications/2007/3/9/reflective-peacebuilding.html; www.beyondintractability.org
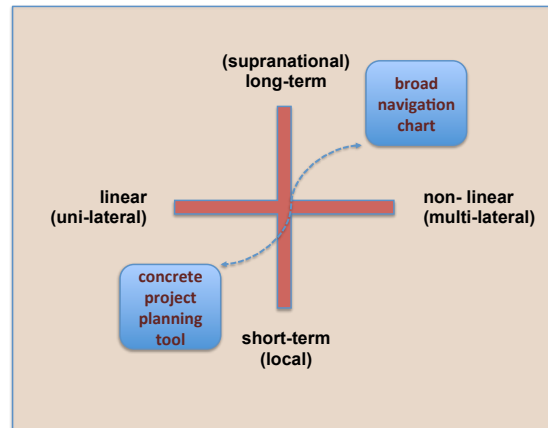
Nevertheless, there is a minimum standard all ToC should meet. This is, there are a set of core components that any "good" ToC should contemplate[8]:

- Visioning and **visualising the desired change** or 'dream'
- **Exploring the ideas of stakeholders and other key actors about how change takes place** and could be achieved (their "theories of change")
- **Analysis of the context and 'ecosystem'** (social, political, economic, ecological, stakeholder & actor analysis, power, gender, drivers of change, opportunities, etc.)
- **Mapping 'pathways of change'**, which can be pictured as result chains or a less linear representation of projected future developments
- **Making explicit the assumptions underlying the intervention**, the logic of the pathways/ result chains and the strategic choices
- **Exploring options** for multi-actor collaboration
- **Strategic planning for the mid-term**, using an adaptive/ iterative model - or Logframe if required
- **Developing a framework for documenting the change process**, monitoring, evaluation, learning & reflection on what works, building an evidence base. Identifying knowledge gaps and a learning or research agenda

2.   Key concepts and processes

There are certain concepts and processes underlying the understanding and use (thinking-action) of Theory of Change. I want to focus on the ones I believe are crucial to consider for effective and purposeful use of ToC.

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[8]Hivos/Marjan van Es, 2013, *Hivos and Theory of Change*, Policy Brief, October, not pusblished

A logic model. A map to locate ourselves in the ever-changing territory

First of all, Theory of Change provides us with a map of how reality is now and how it may unfold in the future. And therefore, we must we aware of its own limitations because people with certain mindsets, culture, interests, projections, blind spots, etc. design this map. So it is indeed a biased representation of (future) reality. The map is not the territory! This fact implies checking periodically our assumptions about how reality is, how change happens, and what our contribution is to that desired change we seek to achieve through our interventions. The following logic model helps us understand the main elements of Theory of Change from an action-learning perspective.
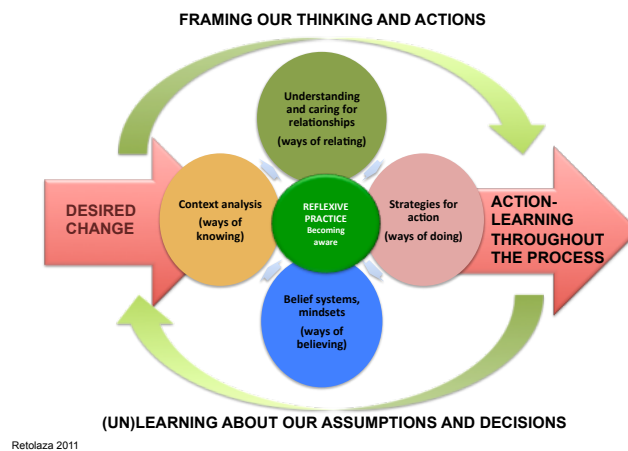
Context analysis. Ways of knowing

Once we define an initial desired change we want to contribute to happen in a given situation or issue, we look at the context to understand present reality and the gap existing between the current situation and the desired one in the future. Few like-minded people in a small room may do this or it may be part of a wider and more inclusive multi-perspective exercise. The more diverse the worldviews, interests, and identities involved in the exercise, the richer the analysis. Different actors with different identities and life experiences have different learning styles and bodies of (experiential) knowledge. This context analysis exercise becomes a process in itself because if properly done (multi-stakeholder engagement approach) may foster a container for more honest and transformational relationships among the actors who later on will be involved somehow in the implementation of the initiative.

Understanding and caring for relationships. Ways of relating

As said above, the richer the network of relationships we can foster through our work, the better. Normally, social change actors and activists tend to relate mainly with the like-minded ones; but paradoxically, many of

the changes we want to push for demand building trusting and effective relationships with those very non-like minded actors who hinder the possibility for our desired future to happen. This is a major challenge for all of us working in social development and change. First of all it demands a change of behaviour in ourselves in case we want to achieve higher and better participation, ownership, and buy-in from other actors. Theory of Change practice lies strongly on a good and deep stakeholder analysis right from the beginning and also throughout the process. Therefore, periodical stakeholder analysis is a must in case we want to monitor and adjust effectively our relational strategies regarding key actors affecting our ToC.

Belief systems and mindsets. Ways of believing

As a result of all said above, there is a need for making explicit people's assumptions about how reality is, how change happens, and how they believe they can meaningfully contribute to that desired future situation. And because reality is an ever-changing flux of movement, we need to check periodically our assumptions as we move along the emergent process. Some of them could be wrong and could hinder the accomplishment of our goals and the effectiveness of our strategies (performance and relational). This dynamic and iterative assumption management approach is key for developing critical and creative thinking in times of uncertainty.

Strategies for action. Ways of doing

All the above (ways of seeing, relating, and believing) shapes our action (ways of doing). Therefore, the effectiveness of our strategies and actions will be determined by the quality of the process of analysing (diversity in the room), relating (multi-stakeholder engagement), and believing (critical and creative thinking). There are two sets of strategies: proactive and adaptive. *Proactive* strategies seek to shape the (future) context. These are action-oriented strategies (straightforward activism). *Adaptive* strategies invite us to go beyond our conventional ways of doing by adapting ourselves to whatever arises in the context. It may demand changes in ourselves (personal, organisational) and we must prepare for it by implementing good adaptive management practices. When designing and implementing our ToC we should leave room for alternative strategies, not just one, because the process may emerge in a different way as expected. And this may require strategic changes on our side. Having thought beforehand about alternative strategies and pathways of change when designing our ToC allows for more adaptive management.

Reflexive practice. Becoming aware (and changing if necessary)

Theory of Change is strongly sustained on behavioural change: structural institutions, organisations, procedures, norms and regulations, intra/inter-personal relationships affecting individuals and/or groups, etc. This has major implications when working with others; but mainly it has paramount implications for us at personal and organisational level. Many development organisations (from high-level donors to local grassroots

organisations) focus their work on changing something else…but themselves. This needs to change. We need to walk the talk, be more coherent with our preaching. Looking at the world nowadays, how can we still ask other people to change and still resist changing ourselves? Reflective practice supports deeper processes of personal and organisational change. This is a must, the first stepping-stone for sustainable change. As Mahatma Gandh reminded us, "be the change you want to see in the world". Reflective practice implies processes of un-learning, re-learning, and learning with others too: collaborative learning groups, learning and change oriented M&E, immersions, learning retreats and workshops, learning trips, introspective methods (meditation, journaling, mindfulness, etc.), coaching, etc.

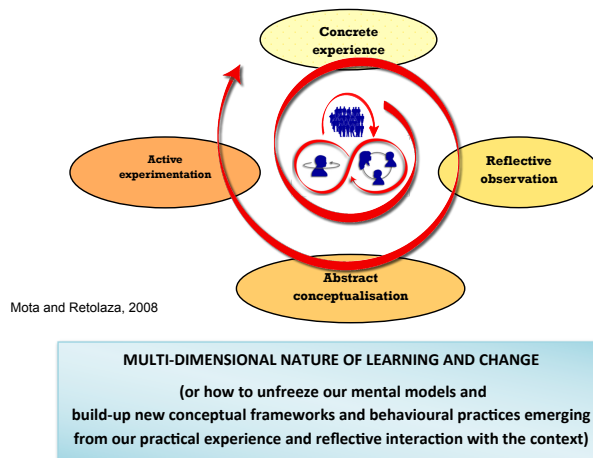## Complexity thinking. A few basic concepts needing deeper exploration

What do we mean when we say social change processes are complex? Concepts such as interdependence, non-duality, emergence, un-certainty, non-locality, unpredictability and so on need deeper exploration on our side to really grasp the understanding, practice, and implications of approaching social change processes from a complexity perspective. The exploration of these concepts is beyond the purpose of this paper. I just want to make explicit here the need for development cooperation actors to become familiar with such concepts so they are able to translating them into effective practice at personal and organisational level. This would help them acquiring a set of basic metaskills necessary to deal more effectively with these sorts of processes[9].

Learning and change. An interactive and iterative multi-level approach

I just want to emphasize the importance of interactive and iterative experiential learning as the way to go when approaching social change from a complexity perspective. *Interactive learning* implies three levels: personal, group, and social. Since humans are social beings, and because our work deals with socially constructed phenomena, individuals need other individuals to learn certain things that alone cannot. So if we are serious in our endeavour, we need to promote group processes for that to happen: collaborative learning groups, participatory action-learning, multi-stakeholder dialogues, etc. At social level, we also should promote cognitive and behavioural change processes to help societies and social groups to learn and change: awareness-raising campaigns related to dysfunctional collective behaviours (gender violence, discrimination based on gender, age, identity, locality, etc.), supporting democratic and value-based education systems, working with public opinion makers, etc.

Iterative learning is closely related to Dynamic Assumption Management (DAM) and the need to periodically revisit the underlying assumptions sustaining our interventions as we move along the process. This calls for an enhanced and up-dated understanding and practice of M&E, less focused on output oriented M&E and more on contribution oriented assessment.

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[9]Retolaza I., 2014, *Surfing the waves of complexity. Theory of change and complex group process facilitation*, Action-Learning Report, Hivos, forthcoming

Mota and Retolaza, 2008

MULTI-DIMENSIONAL NATURE OF LEARNING AND CHANGE

**(or how to unfreeze our mental models and
build-up new conceptual frameworks and behavioural practices emerging
from our practical experience and reflective interaction with the context)**
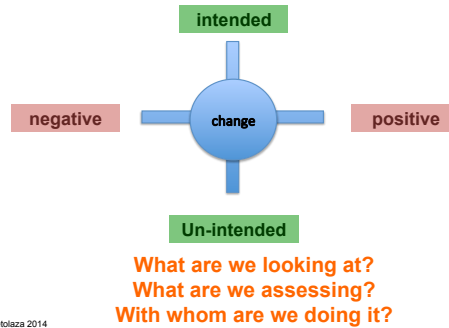
Contribution Assessment. The missing link

In real life, most of the development organisations focus their monitoring practices in assessing/measuring issues around output and activities while the project is alive. On the other hand, evaluative practices focus more on assessing/measuring the final impact of the intervention and other issues related to effectiveness, value for money, and so on. But, what happens in-between as regards to the outcomes we set up to direct and assess our contribution to the desired change?

We need to integrate contribution assessment practices in our M&E system. These can be undertaken before (prospective and appreciative visualizations of contribution to desired change), during (adjusting our ToC while the intervention is taking place), and after our intervention (learning-oriented for further improvement of in-coming interventions). Contribution Assessment is focused in knowing more about the outcomes and consequences derived from our intervention. We want to assess and learn about how our intervention will affect, is affecting, and did affect people's life. This means looking not only at positive and expected changes as outlined in our initial Theory of Change, but also at negative and un-expected changes resulting from the emergent and on-going unfolding of reality. These may be a consequence of our interventions but also because other actors' interventions. We need to look at the whole picture and adjust our M&E systems to integrate these other perspectives/phenomena. Complexity thinking-action oriented participatory M&E systems are more effective and realistic in terms of offering us all (not only project managers, but also other key stakeholders involved) valuable information when it comes to changing and/or adjusting our Theory of Change.

Contribution Assessment:
from linear to non-linear M&E practices

intended

negative   change   positive

Un-intended

What are we looking at?
What are we assessing?
With whom are we doing it?

Retolaza 2014

Contribution Assessment responds to the following questions[10]:

- What has changed?
- What sort of change can we see? (positive, negative, expected, un-expected)
- For whom?
- How significant was it?
- Will it last?
- In what ways did we contribute to these changes?

Contribution Assessment processes can help us fill in the gap between linear and non-linear M&E approaches.

3.   A final word

The application of Theory of Change as outlined in this paper poses a great challenge to development cooperation organisations. It implies a series of changes that these organisations need to undertake for addressing more effectively social development and change processes from an action-learning and complexity approach. Hence, these organisations cannot pretend to move coherently towards a Theory of Change approach without considering a series of cognitive and behavioural changes that need to happen i) within their own organisations, ii) in the way they relate to the wider constellation of stakeholders. Collaborative experiential learning processes, events, and activities involving these organisations (learning and doing together) would help them to speed up the process.

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[10] adapted from Maureen O'Flynn presentation "Impact Assessment Training", Brighton, June 2013, IMA International