

## Reflections on Theories of Change in International Development

**Danielle Stein and Craig Valters** have recently published Theories in Practice papers on Community Mediation and Social Harmony in *Nepal* and *Sri Lanka*. Here they raise some ongoing questions facing those engaging with Theories of Change.



Increasingly, international development NGOs are creating 'Theories of Change' to explain how and why their interventions work. Theories of Change commonly take the form of a written document, although the concept can also be part of a reflective approach to development thinking (discussed in our paper [here](#), and in various other places such as [here](#)). It has become common for donors to require written Theories of Change as part of monitoring and evaluation, although some organisations use the concept voluntarily. However it is used, Theory of Change is commonly understood as a way to draw out implicit and explicit 'assumptions' about change processes. Doing so, it is often argued, signals an increased desire for organisations to plan, describe, explore, monitor and evaluate change in a way

that reflects the complexities of development contexts.

Theory of Change has been criticised as simply another development **fuzzword** and a **logframe on steroids**. Based on a [previous literature review](#) on Theory of Change and research conducted in Nepal and Sri Lanka with the [Asia Foundation](#), we pose some overlapping questions on their use in international development.

Firstly, where do Theories of Change come from? Practical experience? Donor pressure? Ideological positions? Theories of Change are increasingly demanded by donors, which may reduce them to another means to 'sell' a programme. If this is the case, is it possible that they will be an honest, accurate and transparent account of how change happens due to an intervention? A good test would be to ask: would an internal Theory of Change look different from one available to outside audiences? Of course, these issues existed long before Theories of Change were introduced to international development, therefore the crucial question is whether they help or hinder our understandings of change processes. One possibility is that they create illusory forms of analysis without the depth required to fully understand the impact of an intervention.

Problematically, if the theories are superficial or misleading, research will most likely call for greater clarity, analysis and use of rigorous evidence **every time**.

Secondly, what is the role of evidence in Theories of Change? It is unclear whether evidence should be used at all, **according to guidance material**. This lack of clarity partly comes down to the purpose of Theories of Change: are they simply uncovered assumptions or are they substantial theories developed from empirical data? For the former, the role of evidence is unclear, however for the latter, the types of evidence used to substantiate a claim and the ways this is collected will be central to validating a theory. In our research, we found that The Asia Foundation's theories made use of evidence to support their claims. However, we found it important to ask which came first: the theory or the evidence? Rather than using evidence selectively to build a case (perhaps like in a lawyer in court), it will be useful to review all available empirical data, generate some more, and then consider which way it points.

Thirdly, what levels of change should Theories of Change represent? Our research **highlighted** that theories may range from being directly connected to programme activities to **representing**

higher-level, longer-term aspirational goals. For example, in both Nepal and Sri Lanka, Theories of Change for community mediation start from an access-to-justice framework, which is closely connected to community mediation's programme activities. However, they also go further to include broader, fuzzier goals, such as improving social harmony and **state-society relations**. Researching a high-level goal like social harmony presented considerable methodological problems, since it is hard to define, let alone substantiate. From our perspective, Theories of Change should be grounded in programme realities, though this will depend on the perspectives and pressures shaping how Theory of Change is used.

The above points overlap and affect one another: if Theories of Change are used to sell programmes, will they use evidence in a balanced way? If evidence is used rigorously, can Theories of Change be high level? Can Theories of Change remain grounded in programme realities given the need to fit programming within dominant narratives? Beyond these issues, an organisation's approach to Theories of Change will also depend heavily on its own politics and the interest of the individuals involved. There is also a problem of priorities: while academics and researchers may proclaim the need for a fully-articulated, evidence-based and rigorous Theory of Change, do practitioners have the time and money to make that happen?

Given these difficulties, it is hard to know what should be expected from Theories of Change. The tensions, pressures and ideologies which can influence them may mean that Theories of Change often become convincing stories, rather than a more embedded learning and reflection process on **assumptions, values and strategic choices**. From a research perspective, it is clear that examining where a theory comes from, what shapes it and how it functions will likely be just as important as analysing the reasoning and evidence within the theory itself. Perhaps through such analysis Theories of Change can become a more useful approach and an interesting entry point for research into development thinking and practice. Or **perhaps not** – we need some evidence to back that up!

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