1 WHAT ARE THEORIES OF CHANGE?

‘Theories’ of change are the ideas and beliefs people have – consciously or not – about why and how the world and people change. How people perceive and understand change and the world around them is infused by their underlying beliefs about life, human nature and society. They are deep drivers of people’s behaviour and of the choices they make.

BOX 1: HIVOS’ DEFINITION OF THEORIES OF CHANGE

Theories of change are the ideas and hypotheses (‘theories’) people and organisations have about how change happens. These theories can be conscious or unconscious and are based on personal beliefs, assumptions and a necessarily limited, personal perception of reality.

2 WHAT IS A THEORY OF CHANGE APPROACH?

Theory of change as an approach is a guiding framework for all stages of thinking, action and sense-making when we intervene intentionally in social change processes. For Hivos, theory of change is a process-oriented approach to analysing the complex systems in which we and our partners and allies work, and for planning actions we think will influence parts of the system in a positive way. The process helps us navigate in unpredictable and complex processes and to track changes in the system to which our interventions may have contributed. For more information, see Hivos Theory of Change Guidelines: pages 12-15.

Hivos distinguishes between Theory of Change as a way of thinking (overall approach), a process (doing a Theory of Change analysis/enquiry) and a product (the result of a Theory of Change process). Theory of Change is a thinking and action approach to navigate the complexity of social change. It is a way of looking at the world that calls on and fosters people’s capacities for critical questioning, not taking things for granted, dealing with uncertainties, and acknowledging the inevitability of diverse perspectives.
3 HOW CAN WE HAVE BETTER AND TESTED ASSUMPTIONS?

Every programme is packed with beliefs, assumptions and hypotheses about how change happens – about the way humans work, or organisations, or political systems, or ecosystems. Theory of change is about articulating these many underlying assumptions about how change will happen in a programme. (Patricia Rogers, in ‘Review of the use of Theory of Change in international development’, Isabel Vogel, 2012).

An assumption is a belief or feeling that something is true or that something will happen, an assertion about the world we do not always question or check. Assumptions stem from and represent values, beliefs, norms and ideological perspectives that inform our interpretation and understanding of reality, and our expectations of what will happen. Assumptions are personal, but can also be part of collective convictions of a specific group having a similar social, cultural, political (etc.) background or history.

An effective Theory of Change process always involves a dialogue about what we know about how change can happen and what we think that we know, that is, what we assume that is going to happen. Making our assumptions explicit is an essential step of the process of making and revising a Theory of Change. That is why we share the following list with you.

3.1 FIVE THINGS ALL OF US SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ASSUMPTIONS

1. Our thinking about development and change is based on multiple ideas or beliefs about what triggers change. We make assumptions about how change processes ‘work’, about the context in which change takes place and about what will happen as a result of interventions. We rarely question our assumptions, we may not even be aware of them. Assumptions are often reinforced because they frame how we see and believe to understand the world, and how we interpret and give meaning to our personal experiences. As they help us in that way, assumptions are great. However, it does imply that we are all biased as assumptions are not always valid. Surprises therefore function as a kind of red flag, as they can be interesting eye openers about implicit assumptions.

2. Every person sees the world from a different perspective. In a multi-stakeholder setting, the people involved in a change process may well have different views on what the desired change is, why it is desired, and how it could and should happen. If these different views are not shared, misunderstandings can arise between partners or allies.
3. When we work with multiple stakeholders, making our assumptions explicit helps us identify common ground for action, as well as shared ideas about opportunities and obstacles. It also stimulates discussions about why our differences between partners exist, and therefore lays the basis for collaboration and consistent programme implementation.

4. Assumptions will help us improving design and innovation. Identifying those assumptions that are precarious to success can help people wake up to new options for action, and to help them choose the most critical pathways on which to focus planning efforts. This helps us move beyond ‘business as usual’, acting based on our blind spots.

5. Identifying and working with assumptions forms the basis for adaptive management. When you deal with complex situations or projects, monitoring outputs, assumptions and processes together enables you to respond in a timely manner to new information, adapt planning and strategies, and decide on the most strategic next steps to take. At the same time, identifying critical assumptions are a good basis for risk management, as it allows for a timely mitigation.

There are two questions which are critical when identifying the important assumptions in our theory of change:

1. What do we assume about the needs, interests and behaviour of stakeholders and other key actors? (assumptions about context)
2. What do we assume about cause-effect relations in the logic of the change pathways? (assumptions about how change happens).

3.2 IMAGINARY INTERVIEW WITH OUR ASSUMPTIONS

While information about the assumptions provided in the preceding section is valuable and useful, the challenge we face is how to translate that theoretical advice into a practical guide to design better assumptions. Well, here there is a technique you can use to find out if you have identified strong assumptions: the imaginary interview.

It is easy, you just have to make this questions and let the answers show you if you are following the right way. Let's start!

Dear assumption

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question 1: Are you referring to an issue currently happening or to one that will happen in the future?</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tip: If the assumption talks about something that will happen in the future it may be an outcome rather than an assumption. For instance:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We assume that the staff of the Minister of Agriculture of Costa Rica have the skills and capacities needed to design strong policies on gender and equality. If this is already happening and we have evidence that demonstrate it is true, the assumption is correct. If not, it could be an outcome, a change we will work for during the implementation of the program.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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### Question 2: Do you talk about a desire or something real?

**Tip:** If the assumption talks about a desire we have it could also be an outcome rather than an assumption. For instance:

We assume that the African Development Bank comprehends the importance of investing in green and inclusive energy. If this is already happening and we have evidence that demonstrate it is true, the assumption is correct.

If not, it is something we desire could happen, a change we will make come true.

### Question 3: Are you a belief or a fact?

**Tip:** Very similar to example above. If the assumption express your believe and there is evidence that demonstrate it is true, the assumption is correct. If is based on your believe and there is no way to prove it true, then it is a weak assumption.

### Question 4: Are you based in an opinion or in a research or study?

**Tip:** If the assumption is based on your opinion and there is evidence that demonstrate it is true, the assumption is correct. If is based on your opinion and there is no way to prove it true, then it is a weak assumption.

### Question 5: Do you represent a specific fact from my context or one from any city, country or region?

**Tip:** The assumption should explain what happens in your very own context. If it expresses a fact that could fit to any reality, it is a very general statement and won’t be very useful. Sharp it!

### Question 6: What kind of choices do you help me to do?

**Tip:** Good assumptions help us make choices explicit and transparent. Your assumption should lead you to decide strategies, areas of focus and even allocation of resources. If your assumption does not lead you anywhere, something is wrong.

### Question 7: What will you help me to learn?

**Tip:** Some assumptions should allow us to learn about our program and its results. If you turn them into questions, its answer should nurture both your research and learning agenda. For instance:

We assume that the African Development Bank comprehends the importance of investing in green and inclusive energy. If this is already happening and we have evidence that demonstrate it is true, the assumption is correct. If not, it is something we desire could happen, a change we will make come true.
Question 8: What will happen to my work if you would be false?

Tip: Some assumptions can make your work a failure; you will not be able to achieve the desired change if the assumption is false. These are the so-called make or break assumptions, therefore it is important to identify them.

Well, that is it! We hope this interview helps you to design better assumptions, to think and reflect beyond the components and have a strong and powerful Theory of Change.

**Brief checklist**

- You have assumptions on the causes of the problem you want to resolve.
- You have assumptions on the needs, interests and behaviours of key actors.
- You have assumptions on cause-effect relations of the change pathway.
- You have identified the critical assumptions.
- You have identified your invalid assumptions.
- You have double checked your assumptions is not a hidden outcome.
- Assumptions are formulated in a way that they can be tested if needed.
- You have identified the assumptions that need to be monitored and tested and you have transform them into learning questions.
- You have interviewed them all.

**4 HOW CAN WE ORGANICALLY INTEGRATE THE THEORY OF CHANGE IN THE WORK WE AND OUR PARTNERS DO?**

We know you dream of using the Theory of Change as a compass for deciding on actions and reviewing both positive and negative results, as a very agile instrument that could become an organic part of your own project cycle. There is one secret to make your dream come true: use the Theory of Change on daily basis! How to do it? Here there are some hints:

**4.1 BRING THE THEORY OF CHANGE TO LIFE**

1. Translate the Theory of Change into an attractive visualization!
2. Print it! Use full color! Favor a big size!
3. Pin it on the wall!
4. Add dates to it! Next to each outcome, note the dates and deadlines you related to it.
4.2 USE THE THEORY OF CHANGE TO MONITOR YOUR ACTIONS AND TAKE DECISIONS

Use of Theory of Change in Project cycle including budgeting
- Use it as the basis to elaborate your annual plan.
- Where are you investing your budget in? Each time you make a payment, identify to what outcome or strategy it contributes. Add a “related outcome” line to your payment order so you can easily track the relationship between the Theory of Change and the spending.

Use of Theory of Change in working with partners and other stakeholders
- Use it—especially the desired change, domains of change strategies—to select partners.
- Every time you hire a consultant or service, add a “related outcome” section to the terms of reference. That way you guarantee that consultant or service will contribute to your Theory of Change.

Use of Theory of Change in day to day activities
- Use it to decide what events do you should attend? Look if the program of the event matches some of your outcomes. If it does, you should be there!
- Use it to decide whether that panel or meeting to which you have been invited is worth it? Identify if it contributes to one or more of your outcomes. If does, attend the meeting and give a great speech!

Use of Theory of Change in Communication
- Bring shortened components of the Theory of Change into articles you write, briefings and press releases you send to media, reports you should elaborate or to justify your field trips.
- Use your theory of Change as guide to design key messages and public content plans that feed your websites, printed materials and social media strategies.
4.3 BENEFITS OF DAILY USE OF THE THEORY OF CHANGE

• You will organically integrate into your daily thinking and managing.
• Your activities will 100% coherent with your Theory of Change.
• You will make Theory of Change-based decisions.
• It saves you time, thanks to the almost real-time monitoring of your Theory of Change.
• It facilitates the reporting and monitoring processes
• You will be able to do a more accurate monitoring of your budget.
• You will develop a sixth sense to identify what is working and what is not in your program.

Your theory of change can been used as a sailing map, which you use to navigate and where you always go back to make decisions, for example, to decide whether or not undertake an activity and whether that will take you to where you want to be. This multi-lane process also gives you a link to the monitoring system, based on outcome harvesting that builds on the Theory of Change. Hope you enjoy the ride!

5 WHEN DO WE NEED TO REVISE OUR THEORY OF CHANGE?

Please go through the following list. If you mark at least one box, you must revise your Theory of Change!

☐ You will write a project proposal and need to contextualise a generic theory of change a already developed, in order to have a more focused one.
☐ You have doubts about the implementation of your project and need to think what needs to be kept, and what not; what changes are needed in actors, or interventions/activities. Use two main questions: Why has it not worked so far? What should we do differently?
☐ You have some credible evidence on lessons learnt -clear and robust enough- that shows the decision-making or certain aspects should be strengthened.
☐ It has already passed one year since the last time you revised your current Theory of Change.
☐ The laws you are doing advocacy on, have changed (or other relevant political changes have happened). If so, you need to review your Theory of Change more frequently than on a yearly basis.
☐ Your current work concerns a new theme, or area with which you are less familiar. In this case you also need to review your Theory of Change more frequently than on a yearly basis.
☐ The newer the programme, the less familiar the region, the audiences, etc, the more frequent you need to revisit your Theory of Change. Together, these suggestions point to a mix of regular moments of revisiting a Theory of Change with more ad-hoc moments.

“The voyage of discovery is not seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes”

Marcel Proust
6 WITH WHOM TO REVISIT YOUR THEORY OF CHANGE?

It is generally thought that it is important that partners agree to the Theory of Change, so as to enhance ownership and ensure that all contribute to agreed outcomes. You can also undertake a quality audit by your own. The main question guiding you is “is our analysis still correct?” In order to judge this, the team needs to be self-critical and therefore can benefit from having constructive outsiders involved to push their thinking further. The focus will be mainly on the content. But it can also include reviewing the quality of participation and the quality of use.

7 WHAT INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE TO USE TO REVISE YOUR THEORY OF CHANGE?

The criteria is not necessarily how scientific the information is, but whether it can enrich your perspective. We may lack information and knowledge to validate ourselves, e.g. regarding assumptions how change happens or how things work. Looking for “external” or “outside” knowledge does not necessarily mean inviting external persons. We can deliberately look for work from others, by using what is available from literature. To learn more on the audits visit Hivos’ Theory of Change Guide p.80

8 WHEN DO I KNOW MY THEORY OF CHANGE IS GOOD ENOUGH?

A Theory of Change is a tool that helps you and the partners in your programme to navigate towards your programme goal. A Theory of Change therefore should contain information about, among others, the goalposts, that is, the desired changes you want to prioritize, the possible stepping stones (change paths) to arrive at those prioritized changes, and help you identify what doesn’t make sense to undertake within the budget of available time and other resources.

A Theory of Change can be very detailed with lots of information and many arrows, or it can be more superficial outlining desired changes only at a general level. How then, do I know that my Theory of Change is good enough?

For a more detailed guidance, we refer you to the Theory of Change Guidelines, especially pages 75, 81-83…….. You can learn more on the quality of the Theory of Change in pages 84-87 of Hivos Theory of Change Guidelines. The Guidelines also describes how to do a quality audit of a Theory of Change, using five principles (Theory of Change Guidelines p.81):

1. Is analysis comprehensive enough in terms of context, actors, and strategic options?
2. Are power and gender considerations explicit in the analysis?
3. Are the assumptions comprehensive and clearly formulated?
4. Has the Theory of Change been developed with enough of the right people?
5. Is the Theory of Change being used actively by the relevant people to guide implementation and MEL processes?

A Theory of Change quality audit is nothing more – or less – than assessing the existing Theory of Change, both the narrative and its visual representation, in terms of how well it upholds the five principles of good quality Theory of Change practice.
To judge at a quick glance whether your Theory of Change is good enough, three key guidelines form the bare minimum.

A first guideline is that your Theory of Change should be a product created with a minimum level of agreement amongst co-implementing staff members from your own or from partner organisations (1). This is needed to ensure a workable level of shared understanding and ownership of the Theory of Change. Generally, this minimum level of agreement is the product of a number of rounds of discussions, consultations, negotiations and maybe even some formal or informal research. The number of rounds (and time) needed depends on the initial level of divergence, e.g. whether people see eye-to-eye, or have a totally different background and vision; and on the pace which you can arrive at a minimum level of agreement. What then is a ‘minimum level of agreement’? This depends. Agreeing on what is the common goal, long-term or intermediate desired outcomes is important especially early in the process of working together. This refers to the ‘higher’, ‘further-in-time’ levels of your Theory of Change. When co-implementers have worked together for a longer time, they may reach agreement about collaboration or complementarity at lower (nearer-in-time) levels.

A second guideline is that your Theory of Change should inspire a minimum level of confidence in those who will work with it. There is a number general ways to boost the confidence:

• By using up-to-date and comprehensive information about the context and stakeholders in the making of the Theory of Change; and keeping that information updated and current.
• The desired change and the change path describing how to achieve it is based on evidence, and relevant for the people whose lives are meant to improve.
• By having an internal logic and coherence, that is, for example:
  • there are no lose ends such as stand-alone outcomes, e.g. a long-term outcome without intermediate outcomes or interventions that lead to it;
  • one level leads logically to the next;
  • There are no gaps or overlaps, e.g. interventions that do not lead to intermediate outcomes and long-term outcomes, or one outcome appears at two levels.

A third guideline is that you should always be ready to refine or adjust your Theory of Change when something unexpected happens. A Theory of Change is not a yardstick, and although it is used as a planning tool, it is not a blue print, set in stone. If you learn something important about your advocacy targets or the context that merits changing your Theory of Change, do it! Maybe you fall into the trap of being good friends with a group of important lobby targets, or maybe you have already invested lots of efforts in pushing for a change. However, if you want to be a facilitator of change, keeping your Theory of Change updated is like a crafts(wo)man who knows that a blunt tool hinders delivering a good job and therefore regularly sharpens her or his tools.

9 HOW CAN A THEORY OF CHANGE PROVIDE YOU A FRAMEWORK TO INTEGRATE ALL OTHER INSTRUMENTS?

Importantly, a Theory of Change in itself is just a piece of paper or a nice visual. It is about creating and strengthening a Theory of Change mindset, a way of thinking that is guided by questions related to what Change to achieve rather than what activities to undertake.

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1 Allies can form part of the group co-implementers.
With this mind set, a Theory of Change becomes a kind of an umbrella tool. It provides you with a framework to integrate the other instruments we use to plan, monitor and evaluate our activities and results. For example, you use the language of your Theory of Change to make sure that tools and activities align, and that the language match.

**Example 1:** when you elaborate outcome statements, you write in the section on Relevance how the outcome you describe is relevant to the Desired Changes, whether short-, long-term or Intermediate, described in your Theory of Change.

**Example 2:** when you formulate Learning Questions, you look for the most important (make or break) assumptions in your Theory of Change.

**Example 3:** when you organize an annual reflection and planning event, or any kind of learning and planning event, you use your Theory of Change for setting the scene: the framework for reflection.

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