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2-2013

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## Theories of Change

### Abstract

A theory of change is a purposeful model of how an initiative— such as a policy, a strategy, a program, or a project—contributes through a chain of early and intermediate outcomes to the intended result. Theories of change help navigate the complexity of social change.

### Keywords

social change, theories, development

### Comments

#### Suggested Citation

Serrat, O. (2013). Theories of change. Manila: Asian Development Bank.

#### Required Publisher's Statement

This article was first published by the Asian Development Bank ([www.adb.org](http://www.adb.org))

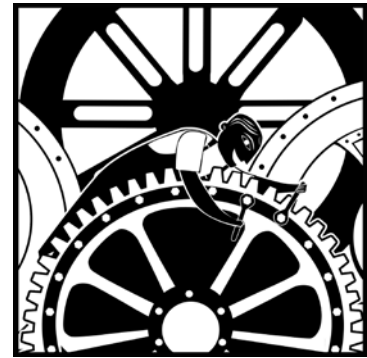
# Theories of Change

By Olivier Serrat

A theory of change is a purposeful model of how an initiative—such as a policy, a strategy, a program, or a project—contributes through a chain of early and intermediate outcomes to the intended result. Theories of change help navigate the complexity of social change.

## The Complexity of Social Change Processes

Social change<sup>1</sup>—the process whereby individuals and communities adjust or abandon customs and associated leading ideas, values, and purposes to act differently in response to random (unique) or systemic factors—is no simple matter. It is driven by a composite array of cultural, demographic, economic, environment, political, religious, scientific, and technological forces, singly but more often than not in coevolutionary combination, and almost always in the face of vested interests that favor the status quo. What is more, irrespective of evolutionary, conflict, or functional explanations, there are different forms, nay, intensities, of it:



- Discursive—a change in the narrative(s) that actors hold about a concern, problem, or issue.
- Procedural—a change in the way the processes that manage a concern are carried out.
- Content-based—a change in the nature of a concern.
- Attitudinal—a change in the way actors think about a concern.
- Behavioral—a change in the way actors behave vis-à-vis a concern, in other words, act

or interface with others, in consequence of formal and informal changes in discourse, procedure, content, or attitude.

Development aid, for one, is ever more sternly asked to demonstrate results, an ancillary of which is to clarify what works or does not work and

*... one cannot but wonder how an environment can make people despair and sit idle and then, by changing the conditions, one can transform the same people into matchless performers.*

—Muhammad Yunus

<sup>1</sup> Social change is any alteration in the social order of a society—reflected for instance in institutions or relations, brought about by modified thought processes. (Illustrative examples of social change that, chronologically, produced profound social consequences include the industrial revolution, the abolition of slavery, and the feminist movement.) Sociologists have proposed evolutionary, conflict, and functionalist theories of change to elucidate what triggers it. [The chief proponents of each theory of change were Auguste Comte (1798–1857), Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), and Emile Durkheim (1858–1917); Karl Marx (1818–1883); and Talcott Parsons (1902–1979), respectively.]

under what circumstances.<sup>2</sup> And if development aid is about human, social, and economic progress, which of course intuitively change, it needs therefore to frame more clearly what concrete outcomes—from dedicated inputs, activities, and outputs—can augment well-being and better the quality of life. Specifically, development aid needs good theories of change that test and validate the assumptions, rationales, means, and ends of all who are involved in processes of development as academic and research institutions, communities, consultants, civil and nongovernment organizations, donors, implementing and executing agencies, individuals, private companies, etc. Unfortunately, *pace* the cause-and-effect structure of logic models, current project planning tools do not readily help them do so.

### Explicating Assumptions ...

Marrying visioning, planning, and evaluation perspectives, leveraging also concepts of logic models, the Theory of Change method is an outcomes-based, participatory approach that applies critical thinking to the design, implementation, and evaluation of an initiative, e.g., a policy, a strategy, a program, or a project, planned to foster emergent, projectable, or transformative change.

*First say to yourself what you would be; and then do what you have to do.*

—Epictetus

Concisely, a theory of change explains how and why a sequence of logically-linked events, aka pathways of change, should lead to an ultimate outcome. It does so by articulating assumptions<sup>3</sup> (or worldviews), and the beliefs and hypotheses they rest on, about how short-, medium-, and long-term change happens in a specific external context; and stipulating how early and intermediate outcomes (preconditions) toward the long-term change will be brought about and documented with indicators that suggest how much of, for whom, and when each outcome is to be realized.<sup>4</sup> In short, a theory of change explores and represents a "so that" chain.

### Box: Logic Models and Theories of Change: Telling Them Apart

A logic model (results framework) is a tactical description of the process of delivering an outcome: it insists on, somewhat mechanistically, inputs and activities, the outputs they generate, and the connections between the outputs and the desired outcome. (A recurring weakness is that assumptions are poorly articulated and stakeholders are unsure about how the change process will unfold across components.)

In contrast, a theory of change is a strategic picture of multiple interventions required to produce early and intermediate outcomes that are preconditions to a long-term change. (A strength is that causal pathways specify what is needed for outcomes to be achieved: assumptions can be tested and measured. Hence, the Theory of Change method enables organizations to think about their work more deeply.) Once an outcome has been identified, a results framework can be drawn to explain how it will be reached; thus, a theory of change could be underpinned by several logic models.

In short, logic models and theories of change differ markedly in terms of the views and experiences each holds in store vis-à-vis explanation or exploration on the one hand and accountability versus learning on the other.

Source: Author.

<sup>2</sup> The bilateral and multilateral development agenda of the 2000s revealed (continuing) concern for effectiveness. In 2005, the signatories to the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness adopted a concise framework for improving the quality of aid and its impact on development. It is now the norm for aid recipients to forge their own national development strategies with their parliaments and electorates (ownership); for donors to support these strategies (alignment) and work to streamline their efforts in-country (harmonization); for development policies to be directed to achieving clear goals and for progress towards these goals to be monitored (results); and for donors and recipients alike to be jointly responsible for achieving these goals (mutual accountability). In 2008, the Accra Agenda for Action reaffirmed these commitments; it also invited greater collaboration among donors, recipients, governments, and civil society organizations. Evidence-based solutions, among others, form part of the emerging development agenda of the 2010s. Naturally, what theories of change they rest on are not static and call for diffusion, replication, critique, and modification so they may prove themselves valid (or not).

<sup>3</sup> In development aid, three standard assumptions must perforce be explored. Time and again, they relate to: (i) causality, (ii) implementation, and (iii) external factors.

<sup>4</sup> Some outcomes may eventuate in a domino effect; this means that achieving an early outcome may lead to an intermediate outcome without further intervention under the initiative.

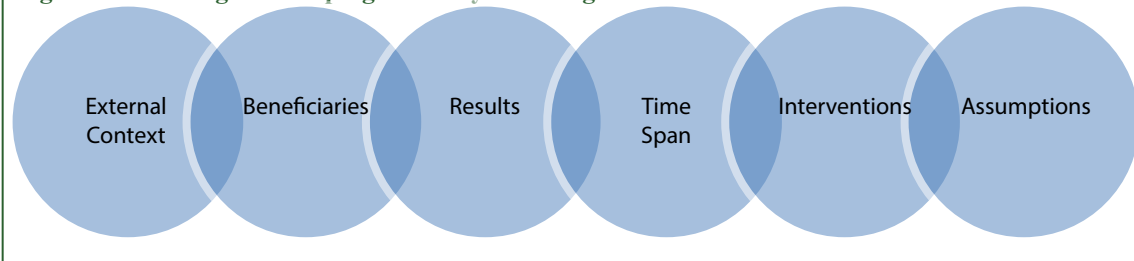
For sure, Doug Reeler<sup>5</sup> argues persuasively, development is a complex process; power both lives and is transformed in relationships; learning from experience is the basis of self-determination; and not all crises are failures. However, without seeking absolute truth or a definitive recipe to eliminate uncertainty, making theories of change more explicit from the onset helps ascertain just what needs to happen if, say, an initiative is to get the target population from here to there. A theory of change should answer six overlapping questions: (i) what concern,

*Social advance depends as much upon the process through which it is secured as upon the result itself.*

—Jane Addams

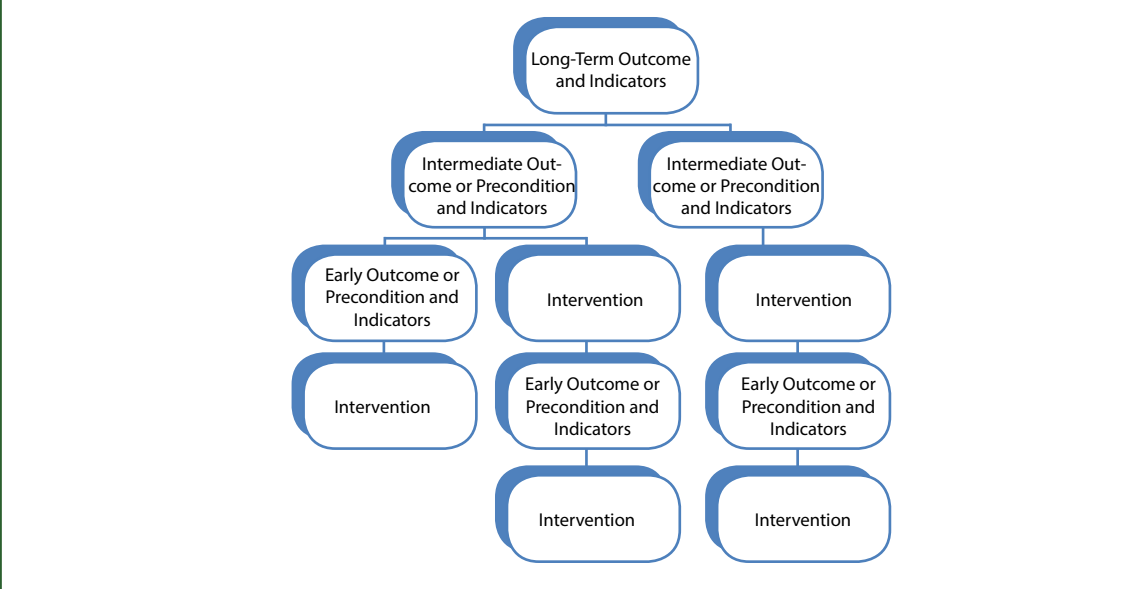
its underlying causes, and consequences, does one and others wish to ameliorate in the long term (external context)? (ii) who does one seek to benefit or influence (beneficiaries)? (iii) what benefits does one aim to deliver (results)? (iv) when will the benefits be realized (time span)? (v) how will one and others make that happen (interventions)? and (vi) why, and based on what evidence, does one believe the theory of change will bear out (assumptions)?

**Figure 1: Focusing and Scoping a Theory of Change**



Source: Author.

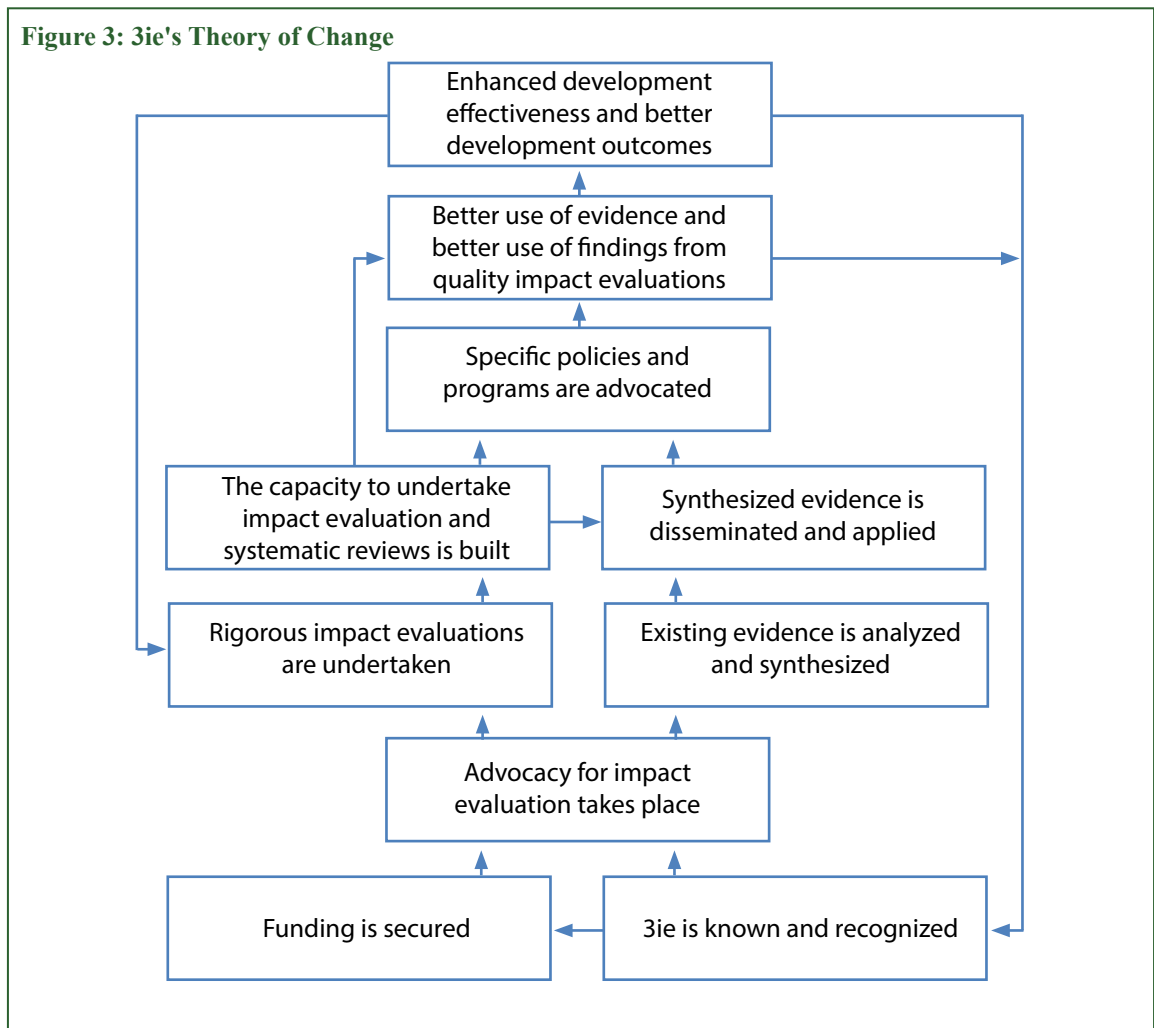
**Figure 2: Elements in a Pathway of Change**



Source: Author.

<sup>5</sup> Doug Reeler. 2007. *A Three-Fold Theory of Social Change and Implications for Practice, Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation*. Community Development Resource Association.

**Figure 3: 3ie's Theory of Change**



Source: International Initiative for Impact Evaluation. 2012. *Annual Report 2011: Providing Evidence to Influence Policy*. New Delhi/London/Washington.

### Between Intentions and Results Lies a Theory of Change

The Theory of Change method is a conscious and creative visualization exercise, preferably a habit, not a product. Where the initiative it purports to rationalize is ambitious, the thinking that underpins the theory must be given time to evolve with reflective analysis and practice; therefore, it should not be set in one single attempt. (Because assumptions can take time to firm up, an iterative, staged process—integrated with other approaches for continuous improvement, e.g., the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle—can sharpen the outlook.) Some advantages of the Theory of Change approach are that it can help

- Develop joint understanding of an initiative and surface differences.
- Circumscribe and bridge the gaps between local- and national-level changes.
- Unearth assumptions.
- Strengthen the focus, clarity, and effectiveness of an initiative by better locating the rationale, means,

*The society which scorns excellence in plumbing as a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy: neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water.*

—John W. Gardner

and ends of interventions and measuring their success.

- Design strong plans of action.
- Clarify lines of responsibility.
- Empower people to become more active and involved in a multi-stakeholder and collaborative experiential learning exercise.
- Identify resources and check them for adequacy.
- Recognize the most appropriate clients, audiences, and partners a sponsor can work and hold open conversations with.
- Foster collaboration between donors and avoid duplication.
- Communicate work more succinctly with a common language.
- Support organizational development in line with the core focus and priorities.
- Build a fruitful framework for monitoring and evaluation.
- Point up ineffective interventions.

Of course, such advantages are contingent on a theory of change being:

- Meaningful—the magnitude of the long-term outcome being pursued is worth the effort.
- Plausible—evidence and commonsense suggest that the interventions, if implemented, will lead to the long-term outcome.
- Doable—resources, e.g., financial, human, institutional, knowledge, political, skills, technical, and time, will be available and sufficient to execute the interventions.
- Testable—the theory of change is suitably specific and complete for an evaluator to track progress in credible and useful ways.

*Facts do not speak for themselves. They speak for or against competing theories. Facts divorced from theories or visions are mere isolated curiosities.*

—Thomas Sowell

What initiatives actors propose reflect the health of their theories of change and willingness to measure what accomplishments really matter. Needless to say, both hinge on their own stage of development. In the final analysis, therefore, the real benefit of the Theory of Change method is that it builds capacity for purposeful theory and its effective use.

## Further Reading

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#### Asian Development Bank

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