

# Can Theories of Change Reflect the Realities of International Development?

By *Craig Valters*

Can a 'Theory of Change' really be an honest, accurate and transparent reflection of how a development intervention may lead to change? Theories of Change are often required by donors in international development. They commonly take the form of a document describing how and why an organisation's programme will make a difference on the ground. Yet the very fact that Theories of Change are demanded may create certain tensions and pressures which contradict the purpose of using them. The grand narratives found within Theories of Change (along with other donor-facing documents) may act as 'mobilising metaphors', telling us more about how the relationship between aid donors and receiving organisations functions than how a programme operates and/or has wider impacts.

Ideally, a Theory of Change approach helps practitioners grapple with the complexity of change processes. Yet, they may also need to fit within donors' high level strategic narratives which, crucially, are subject to change over time. This can potentially hinder a genuine understanding of change processes. While a programme may well fit within a particular analytical framework (like state-society relations), such frameworks can also create a skewed, top-down understanding of local change. This can also create situations in which pre-existing programmes are made to fit various high-level narratives over a period of years, without changing significantly in practice on the ground. The idea that donor-facing documentation may provide distorted versions of reality is hardly new. But there is good reason to think that Theory of Change is equally susceptible to such distortion.

The JSRP's research with The Asia Foundation (TAF) analysed their Theories of Change for programmes in Nepal, Philippines, Timor-Leste and Sri Lanka. One conclusion, specifically from the research in Nepal and Sri Lanka, is that examining how a theory has evolved, what has shaped it and the role it plays (or does not play), may be just as important as analysing its conceptual and empirical underpinnings. One way of doing this (when a programme has been running for years already) is through a kind of historical analysis: what previous claims about 'how change happens' have been made? Where did these claims come from? How is the new Theory of Change different? What does this tell us about the relationship between policy and practice?

For over 20 years, TAF in Sri Lanka has been supporting the Sri Lankan Ministry of Justice (MoJ) in its development of a country-wide form of alternative dispute resolution. The early principles behind TAF's engagement were clearly aligned with those of the MoJ at the time: first, to reduce the number of cases going to severely backlogged courts and second, to provide 'access to justice' by developing an 'informal, easily accessible and affordable dispute resolution system' that is 'efficient and effective'. While these principles have remained constant – often located within an 'access to justice' framing – in external project documents and donor reporting, the overarching rationales for their support have been broader.

For example, over a 20 year period, TAF's support for mediation boards was articulated through various ideas, such as: they were a mechanism to address citizens' grievances, specifically for politically marginalised and socially disadvantaged groups, to support conflict mitigation, conflict prevention, improving social harmony and state-society relations. As detailed in our research paper, such meta-narratives commonly related to the changing context and strategic donor frameworks. For example, the notion of 'social harmony' emerged after the end of the war in 2009; it seems in part from its suitability to fit within a donor conflict-prevention paradigm, as well as a post-war state narrative of national unity and social cohesion. Equally, the notion of 'improving

**state-society relations**' found in TAF's recent Theory of Change emerged in tandem with DFID's strategic focus on this concept as part of their **PPA funding stream**.

Here we see how such narratives function as mobilising metaphors. Clearly, there are considerable donor and government pressures to fit within particular narratives in order to operate in a country. Broad policy ideas, such as 'improving state-society relations' are socially appropriate: as David Mosse **highlights**, these terms can 'submerge ideological differences, allowing compromise, room for manoeuvre or multiple criteria of success, thus winning supporters by mediating different understandings of development'. Equally, personnel changes within an organisation may affect the choice and direction of specific policy ideas and narratives, both due to a loss of institutional memory and the different perceptions of international development individuals bring to their role.

Uncertainty about the motivations for making certain claims should not be confused as proof that wider effects are not happening; perhaps a particular macro focus may allow practitioners, through monitoring and evaluation, to pick out wider effects that were not considered previously. It is also true that there is a genuine interest among some donors and practitioners to try and understand what kind of higher-level, longer-term contributory social impacts aid programmes may be having, something that analytical tools like Theory of Change may be able to help plan, describe, explore, monitor and evaluate. Furthermore, perhaps it is not surprising that programme staff do not articulate these higher-level theories as part of the programme goals, since they may be more focused on expected results and outcomes in the short to medium term.

However, problematically, if the grand narratives, or meta-Theories of Change, alter along with funding cycles, this indicates that they may not be genuine longer-term goals but relatively opportunistic short-term narratives. The way this functions is common knowledge in development, where donors tend to expect conformity to current narratives, and organisations and their implementing partners know to frame their work in that language in order to secure funding. This is not a dynamic solely between donors and aid organisations; donors are also under considerable pressure to justify their aid budgets to their governments and citizens, which can encourage a difficult (and sometimes contradictory) balancing act between needing to demonstrate concrete 'results' as well as aim for more diffuse macro-level impacts.

Yet this is problematic for the concept of Theory of Change, since a focus on such high-level narratives may prevent theories from being an accurate, honest and transparent account of an intervention's contribution to change. The tensions, pressures and ideologies which can influence them may mean that Theories of Change become convincing stories, rather than a more embedded learning and reflection process on **assumptions, values and strategic choices**.

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