Theory of Change for Development: Understanding, Usage, and Influence

IRMA PETA | DIVISION OF RISK MANAGEMENT AND SOCIETAL SAFETY | LTH | LUND UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN

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Author: Irma Peta

Supervisor: Magnus Hagelsteen

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Irma Peta

Abstract
The Theory of Change (ToC) approach has become popular among the international development community, emerging as a need for organizations to carry out more effective initiatives in the context of an increasingly complex world. The levels at which a ToC process can be aimed are worldwide, organizational, thematic and program or project level. The purpose of this study is to generate a better understanding of how ToC is incorporated and utilized in capacity development projects. The analysis of data from sixteen qualitative semi-structured interviews with capacity development practitioners from implementing organizations and donor agencies confirm the existing ambiguity around the ToC concept. The study also reveals that ToC is suitable for working with complex interventions and it is often utilized at organizational and project level. ToC suitability in tackling complexity lays in the space it provides for working iteratively through multiple processes, assumptions based on research evidence and endless pathways of change. Originally used to address challenges in evaluation practices, ToC is being incorporated earlier in the process and throughout the project management cycle. The ToC approach is preferred for the enhanced communication and collaboration it brings to projects as stakeholders come together to operationalize their vision through the ToC development process. However, ToC is perceived as a challenging method to work with and this study recommends that organizations invest in ToC platforms and in training their staff to work with ToC and incorporate ToC effectively.

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Irma Peta

List of acronyms

CCIs	Comprehensive Community Initiatives
CD	Capacity Development
CDI	The Centre of Development Innovation, Wageningen
DANIDA	Danish Development Assistance Agency
DFID	Department for International Development, UK
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
LFA	Logical Framework Approach
PM	Project Management
RBM	Results-Based Management
SDC	The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SIDA	Swedish Agency for Development Cooperation
ToA	Theory of Action
ToC	Theory of Change
UNISDR	The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction
USA	United States of America
WFP	World Food Programme

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1. Introduction

Disasters pose a serious menace globally with a growing number of human lives lost and severe repercussions for development (Kapucu & Liou, 2014). In the context of an increasingly interconnected world, disruptions and negative consequences cross borders easily (Twigg, 2015). In addition, climate change is foreseen to increase the frequency and ferocity of disaster events (Oppenheimer & Anttila-Hughes, 2016). In the face of these global challenges, the Sendai Framework considers disaster risk reduction crucial for sustainable development (UNISDR, 2017). Capacity development processes are indispensable for achieving disaster risk reduction (Hagelsteen & Becker, 2013).

Capacity development has received special prominence during the past few decades, however, the concept dates as early as the 1950s when international cooperation commenced (Becker, 2014). It is carried out through various management systems, encompassing several design and implementation tools, with the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) being one of the most widely known and used (Bakewell & Garbutt, 2005). Another concept, the Theory of Change (ToC), has been added to the capacity development processes more recently. ToC is one of the most popular concepts in international development settings (Vaessen, 2016). It is said to better address the complexity of big-picture perspectives in development work (Bisits-Bullen, 2014). ToC helps organizations to track intermediate outcomes (Figure 1) and to define the path to achieving the desired change, which enables practitioners to articulate the interrelatedness between different stages in the process (Dhillon & Vaca, 2018, p. 65). About sixty percent of nonprofit organizations in the United States of America (USA) have a ToC to establish the relation between the work conducted and the long-term envisaged change (Innovation Network, 2016, p. 7). Advocates postulate that ToC will revolutionize the ways organizations plan for and evaluate their development initiatives (O'Flynn, 2012).

Figure 1 Then A Miracle Occurs © Sidney Harris

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ToC is used by a wide range of actors in the development community, both donor and implementing agencies (Vogel, 2012, p. 3). Looking at a plethora of projects and the language used in the development sector, the concept is imbued with different meanings, which can cause ToC to be misleading (Mulgan, 2016). In some cases, ToC is used as a project management technique (Bisits-Bullen, 2014). In other cases, it is brought to life by other tools such as the LFA (Bakewell & Garbutt, 2005). Some argue that practitioners need to see ToC always in plural (theories rather than theory), otherwise they might fail to address the complete picture of working efficiently for the desired change (Green, 2011). Going through international development documents where ToC is used gives the feeling that this concept has managed to turn into a developmental buzzword. ToC is increasingly used by organizations, but little research has been conducted on how organizations go about employing a ToC approach into their work (Valters, 2014, p. 4).

The purpose of this study is to generate a better understanding of how ToC is incorporated and utilized in capacity development projects and to investigate how ToC stands in the broad picture of methods, tools, and frameworks used for achieving social change through international development initiatives.

To meet the purpose of the study, the following research question is addressed:

How do project managers and capacity development advisors utilize and incorporate ToC in capacity development projects?

The following objectives are considered to answer the research question:

1. Explore how donors and practitioners (project managers) define and understand ToC.
2. Examine how ToC is utilized and incorporated into the project management processes.
3. Identify the advantages and challenges of working with ToC.

The purpose of the objectives is to break down the research question into more tangible components. For example, the ways both target groups (project managers from implementing organizations and capacity development advisors from donor agencies) define and understand ToC has a direct impact on how they consequently utilize ToC and how they incorporate ToC in capacity development projects. The second objective focuses directly on the specific ways ToC is utilized and incorporated in project management processes and dwells in more depth into how, when and what for is ToC used. Lastly, identifying the advantages of employing a

ToC approach serves to shed light to the increasing use of ToC and why ToC is increasingly preferred in the international development setting. Learning more about the challenges practitioners face when working with ToC helps to better understand how they incorporate ToC, potential reasons why ToC is not used and furthermore it gives the opportunity to compile valid recommendations for addressing these challenges.

2. Theoretical background

This chapter provides an overview of the existing literature about ToC as well concepts and theories drawn from organizational documents. The main components addressed in this section are: the various definitions and understandings around the ToC concept, origin of ToC and why it emerged, ToC advantages and challenges of working with ToC.

2.1 ToC concept and definition

Theory of Change is considered many different things: an approach, a tool, a methodology etc (CDI, n.d.). In most of the cases it is referred to as ToC approach (Stein & Valters, 2012). Other forms in which the ToC concept is encountered include "a pathway of change" (Anderson, 2005), the roadmap (Taplin et al., 2013) "ToC thinking, a blueprint, an engine of change, a theory of action and more." (Stein & Valter, 2012, p. 2). The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) use synonymously Theory of Change, change hypothesis, and impact hypotheses in their ToC handbook (SDC, 2014, p. 2). Others consider ToC a tool (Mendizabal, 2011), "a planning methodology", "a strategic planning process" (Aragón and Macedo, 2010, p. 89), a process, and a product (Vogel, 2012, p. 3). The Swedish Agency for Development Cooperation (SIDA) use ToC and intervention logic interchangeably in the application guidelines addressed to their partner organizations (SIDA, n.d. p. 20). ToCs are ideas and hypothesis "about how change happens" (Hivos, 2015, p. 12). The concept is also encountered as ToC analysis (Hivos, 2015, p. 14). ToC is both the process of stakeholders working together to develop a ToC and the actual ToC product (Taplin et al., 2013, p. 2). Hivos, a Dutch organization well-known for its long experience in working with ToC, distinguishes three ways of looking at ToC: "ToC as a way of thinking (overall approach), a process (doing a ToC analysis/enquiry) and a product (the result of a ToC process)." (Hivos, 2015, p.13). ToC is a different term for Programme Theory and it has been referred to by various names (see Table 1) (Rogers, 2008, p. 30). Sometimes Programme Theory is used instead, considered a less debatable concept compared to ToC (Vaessen, 2016).

Table 1 Programme Theory Terminology (adapted from Rogers, 2008)

Terminology	Author	Year
Programme Theory	Bickman	1990
Programme Logic	Funnell	1997
Theory-based evaluation	Weiss	1995, 1998
Theory of Change	Weiss	1995, 1998
Theory-driven evaluation	Chen	1997
Theory-of-action	Schorr	1997
Intervention logic	Nagarajan & Vanheukelen	1997
Impact pathway analysis	Douthwaite et al.	2004
Programme theory-driven evaluation science	Donaldson	2005

There is no agreed definition of Theory of Change, however basic components (see highlighted words in Table 2) can be found in various definitions (Vogel, 2012, p. 3). All these definitions discuss the desired change or outcome envisioned to take place. Five of the seven definitions mention underlying assumptions, which are considered a defining component of ToC. However, only three of the definitions put an emphasis on articulating assumptions explicitly which is exactly what makes ToC unique. Assumptions are present behind every development idea and what the novelty ToC brings is allowing for space to make hidden assumptions explicit (Harries et al., 2014, p. 6). Interrelatedness and plausibility between different elements and stages of an initiative, which are prevailing elements in the ToC literature, come up in three of the definitions through the use of "sequence of events" (Davies, 2012), "logical sequence of an initiative" (Vogel, 2012) and the linkages between contributions by different actors to a shared vision (Keystone, n.d.). What is not common in these various definitions is the context in which change is supposed to take place i.e. Rogers (2011), Vogel (2012) and Keystone (n.d.) talk about change in the context of an initiative or program whereas Davies (2012) and James (2011) speak about change in a more generic and broader sense.

Table 2 Definitions of Theory of Change

The description of a **sequence** of events that is expected to lead to a particular desired **outcome** (Davies, 2012)
Every programme is packed with beliefs, **assumptions,** and hypotheses about how **change** happens – about the way humans work, or organizations, or political systems, or eco-systems. Theory of change is about articulating these many underlying **assumptions** about how **change** will happen in a programme. (Rogers, 2011)
A tool and methodology to map out the logical **sequence** of an initiative from inputs to **outcomes**. (Vogel, 2012)

A deeper reflective process and dialogue amongst colleagues and stakeholders, reflecting on the values, worldviews and philosophies of **change** that make more explicit people's underlying **assumptions** of how and why **change** might happen as an **outcome** of the initiative. (Vogel, 2012)
Theories of change are the ideas and hypotheses ('theories') people and organizations 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. (HIVOS, 2015)
Theory of change is an ongoing process of reflection to explore **change** and how it happens - and what that means for the part we play in a particular context, sector and/or group of people. (James, 2011)
An explicit presentation of the **assumptions** about how **changes** are expected to happen within any particular context and in relation to a particular intervention. A theory of change maps out which actors have to do what in order to achieve and sustain a vision of success and identifies the major **linkages** between them. (Keystone, n.d.)

This study uses the following ToC definition by Patricia Rogers, a renowned evaluation theory expert: "Every programme is packed with beliefs, assumptions and hypotheses about how change happens – about the way humans work, or organisations, or political systems, or eco-systems. Theory of change is about articulating these many underlying assumptions about how change will happen in a programme" (Rogers, 2011).

ToC makes organizations think about planning in a different way from the traditional planning practices e.g. logic models (Taplin et al., 2013, p. 3). Logic models list the necessary components and work towards solidifying the aimed goal and desired change (Clark & Anderson, 2004, p. 12). With ToC on the other hand, the process starts by defining the long-term desired change and working backwards to identify what is needed to achieve this change (Hivos, 2015, p. 55). ToC is a "backward looking theory" (Mulgan, 2016) where after having outlined the long-term goal, teams work backwards to identify necessary preconditions for achieving the set goal (Taplin et al., 2013, p. 2). During implementation, ToC makes teams think more about what needs to change rather than what they are doing (O'Flynn, 2012, p. 2). ToC helps organizations articulate their vision and all the necessary action they need to undertake for meeting their vision (DANIDA, 2014).

ToC is often compared with the LFA and many practitioners are not able to tell the difference between the two (Vogel, 2012, p. 19). Voices in the development community have raised the concern for ToC not to become a "logframe on steroids" (Green, 2012). Sometimes ToC is used at the project level, as a replacement of the LFA (Eguren, 2014, p. 3). When used for planning purposes, ToC is mainly used to complement log frames (Green, 2015). In cases when it complements logic frameworks, ToC is used, amongst others, for monitoring progress (O'Flynn, 2012, p.2). Other times ToC serves as a visionary tool for guiding organizations

towards the aimed desired change (Anderson, 2005, p. 1) and for explaining how social change happens (Keystone, n.d. p. 18).

LAYERS OF A THEORY OF CHANGE
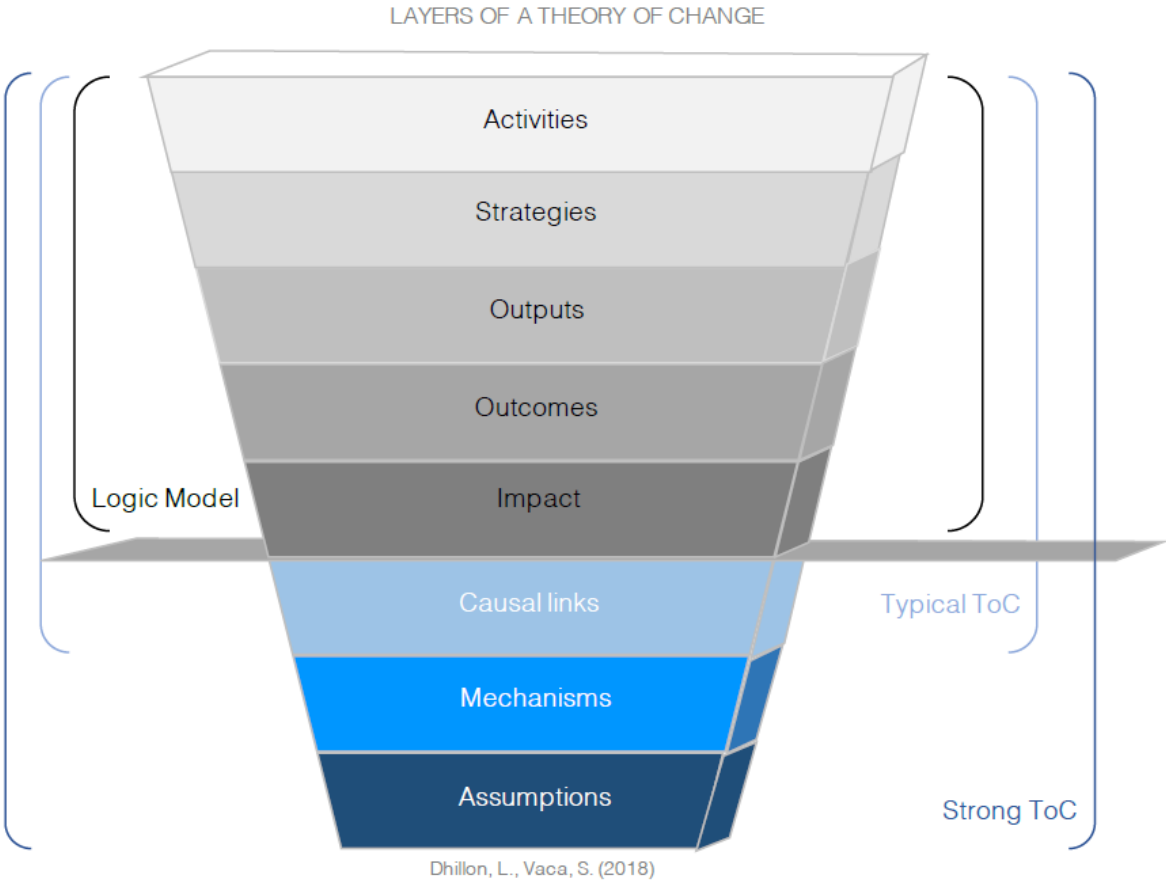
Figure 2 Layers of a Theory of Change (Dhillon & Vaca, 2018)

The LFA mirrors linearity, presents a simplified picture of conditions and assumes control over the context (Chambers & Pettit, n.d.). ToC gives flexibility for working iteratively, allows for space to address complexity (Hivos, 2015, p. 15) and recognizes external factors which might affect inevitably (Bisit-Bullen, 2014). The LFA contains three degrees of results "outputs, outcome (or purpose), and impact (or goal)" (Funnell & Rogers, 2011). ToC has room for infinite "result chains or webs" and pathways of change (Hivos, 2015, p. 15). ToC shares common components with logic models, however, ToC is built upon more tiers (see Figure 2) which help define the necessary preconditions for moving through levels of outcomes and achieving the long-term goal (Dhillon & Vaca, 2018, p. 65). While the LFA considers external factors by making assumptions (Hivos, 2015, p. 15), ToC is founded on clear assumptions based on evidence (Green, 2012).

Figure 3 Different levels at which a ToC process can be aimed (Hivos, 2015)

ToC process can be developed at different levels i.e. worldview, organizational level, thematic (domain) level and programme or project level (Hivos, 2015, p. 18). Notwithstanding the different levels where ToCs are developed within an organization, they need to be able to relate to one another (Global Focus, 2015, p. 16).

2.2 Origin of the ToC & why it emerged

Theory of Change traces its origin from the 1950s with Kirkpatrick's famous model of learning and has since undergone major transformations in the way it is used and has been referred to by different names (see Table 1) as the international development sector has evolved (Center for ToC, 2013). ToC has been developed following two different fields: evaluation processes and part of social change theories (James, 2011, p. 2). ToC emerged as a need to address poor evaluation practices which were not able to adequately deal with the complexity of initiatives (Center for ToC, 2013). The so called comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs), among the earliest of their kind, were said to suffer from lack of satisfactory evaluation methods and procedures (Weiss, 1995). ToC was deemed a suitable approach to address the concerns around CCIs evaluation practices, since weak evaluations

increased the uncertainty of the positive impact CCIs were having (Connell & Kubisch, 1998, p.1). Carol Weiss (1926-2013), one of the pioneers advocating for ToC, is well-known for her early work in "theory-based evaluation" and the oxymoronic phrase "Nothing as practical as good theory" (Weiss, 1995, p. 65). According to Weiss, the inability to carry out adequate evaluations of complex initiatives was the outcome of basing these initiatives on poorly formulated assumptions (Weiss, 1995, p. 82). Such inadequacy takes place earlier in the process, when planning and designing the projects (Weiss, 1995). ToC was made widely popular in the 1990s to tackle various kinds of complex interventions (Clark & Anderson, 2004). In the context of this study, all change aimed by international development initiatives can be considered social change. Many of the ToC reviews which have been used for this study use the terms change and social change interchangeably when speaking about the desired change aimed by international development initiatives. Examples of these reviews include Hivos (2015), Vogel (2012), James (2011), Keystone (n.d.) and Harries et al. (2014) to mention a few.

2.2.1 ToC as a need for addressing complexity

The multifaceted nature of international development makes it challenging for organizations to plan accurately and even more difficult to measure the achieved impact and change (Davies, 2004, p. 101). The development sector has been grappling with complexity and uncertainty of the social issues it undertakes to address for a long time (Valters, 2015, p. 5). Social change is inherently complex which makes the outcomes of development initiatives unpredictable (HIVOS, 2015, p. 7). Development programmes have been under augmented scrutiny on how they are showing reached results (Fraser, 2012).

Organizations operate in dynamic contexts where the breadth of stakeholders and underlying political-economic-social factors is complex and uncertain which makes it a daunting task to measure the achieve impact (Davies, 2004, 101). In a comprehensive report commissioned by UK's development agency DFID on the impact of their development and humanitarian work globally, DFID was not able to fully evaluate the impact of such development and humanitarian work (Flint et al., 2002, stated in Davies, 2004). Measuring the achieved results and the overall impact of the initiatives might require investment in time and resources (Acevedo et al., 2010, pp. 127-128). Problematic issues around evaluation can also have a negative impact on the learning process aimed in international development (Horton et al., 2003).

Simple logic models have been considered insufficient in addressing this complexity and unpredictability in international development (Rogers, 2008, p. 33). Logic models in general are too linear and too simplistic to be helpful (Clark & Anderson, 2014, p. 22). As Rogers (2008) said it "Life is not simple, but many of the logic models used in programme theory evaluation are." (Rogers, 2008, p. 29). ToC concept is encountered and being used increasingly (IDS, 2010, p. 3). ToC approach recognizes the complexity of change processes and gives organizations the possibility to navigate them in more depth (James, 2011, p. 3). ToC is an effective planning and evaluation tool (Mendizabal, 2011). Working with ToC adds value to learning at different levels by increasing strategic thinking quality (Hivos, 2015, p. 7).

2.3 Advantages of ToC

Theory of Change is considered a useful instrument for addressing complex social challenges (Anderson, 2005, p. 1). It is a suitable approach for moving forward organizational "strategic thinking and action" (Hivos, 2015, p. 7). ToC helps practitioners work more efficiently together due to enhanced communication across teams (Taplin et al., 2013, p. 2).

Connell and Kubisch (1998) argue that ToC improves significantly the planning and implementation stages since it makes possible formulation of clearer outcomes and respective activities to reach them. In addition, specific characteristics of the context are taken into consideration. According to the authors Connell and Kubisch (1998), one of the strongest points of basing development initiatives on ToC is the clarity this approach provides throughout the process. Capacity development is informed by ToC, which when made explicit, enables deliberate and complex capacity development practices (Aragón and Macedo, 2010, p. 88). Despite the various forms by which ToC is be presented, assumptions and pathways of change are clearly articulated and tested in every ToC (O'Flynn, 2012, p. 2).

Assumptions are present in every stage of ToC i.e. "input -> output -> outcome -> impact" (De-Hoop, 2014, p. 13). Making assumptions explicit stands at the core of ToC (Vogel, 2012, p. 4). Developing initiatives through ToC would primarily mean "revealing hidden assumptions" and basing decisions on evidence as much as possible (New Philanthropy Capital, 2012). In addition, clarity of assumptions is said to create better data collection practices as well as realistic expectations among participating stakeholders (Connell & Kubisch, 1998, p. 2). Assumptions are of paramount importance since the values, the vision and the whole philosophy is embedded in them (Vogel, 2012, p. 4). Working with a ToC

thinking not only bolsters important processes of monitoring and evaluation and learning but it can also help to better grasp and measure impact of complex projects addressing challenging fields of work (Center for ToC, 2013). ToC makes teams think critically and work creatively, which can bring an innovative spirit to the development initiatives (Vogel, 2012, p. 28). Persistent improvement and polishing of the underlying assumptions can lead to feasible programs appropriate for challenging contexts (Vogel, 2012, p. 4).

ELEMENTS IN A PATHWAY OF CHANGE

Figure 4 Elements in a pathway of change (Anderson, 2005)
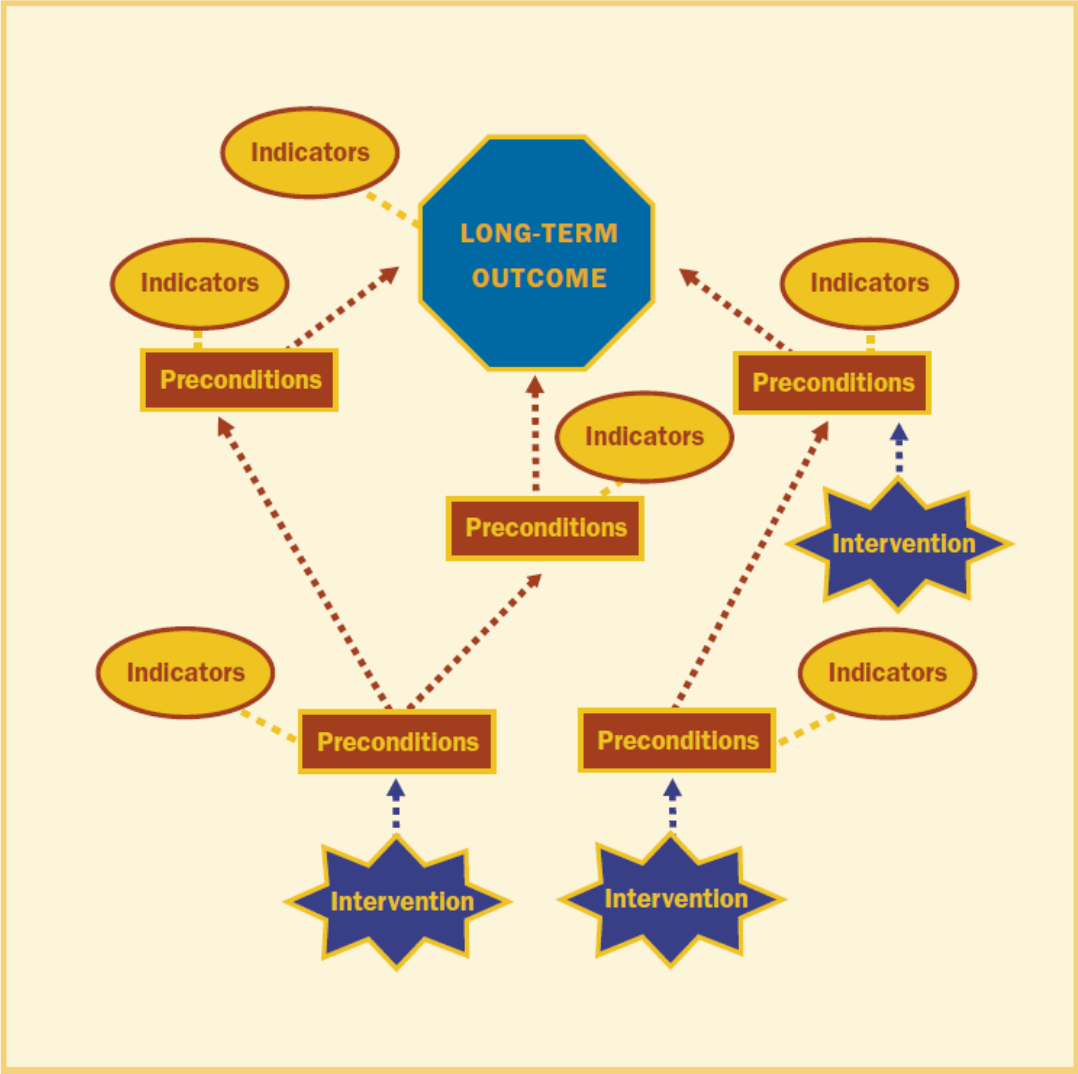
The Aspen Institute considers pathways of change as the most distinguishable element in ToC and defines a pathway of change as "a map that illustrates the relationship between actions and outcomes (see Figure 4) and also shows how outcomes are related to each other over the lifespan of the initiative" (Anderson, 2005, p. 3). Through its pathways of change, ToC makes

it easier to understand what needs to be accomplished for change to be achieved (O'Flynn, 2012, p. 2). Identifying and pursuing the relevant pathways of change helps develop more successful organizational strategies (Filson, 2006). Thus, ToC is an effective tool for planning at a strategic level (Anderson, 2004).

Developing programmes through ToC helps teams to be efficient while focusing on multiple processes and pathways of change (Fraser, 2012). The efforts dedicated to developing the ToC add value to the accountability aspect of programs (Green, 2012).

In a comprehensive review of their peacebuilding initiatives developed with a ToC basis, CARE International recognize ToC to add transparency to their initiatives through open processes of stakeholder inclusiveness (Ober, 2012, p. 2). ToC allows for better logic to their work due to efforts put into explicating clearer hierarchy and links between results as ToC is being developed (Ober, 2012, p. 2). CARE International claim that initiating their work through a ToC approach makes the processes of identifying collaborators for the project and building long-term partnerships, easier and more efficient (Ober, 2012, p. 2). This boosts effective partnerships and at the same time, serves to avoid duplication of initiatives (Ober, 2012, p. 8). Developing the ToC together with other stakeholders results in clearer division of roles and responsibilities among partners (Harries et al. 2014, p. 6). ToC is suitable to work with when dealing with multiple projects or programs and partners (ActKnowledge, 2003, p. 3).

2.4 Challenges of ToC
Despite its strengths and advantages, if made mandatory from the funding donor, ToC risks turning into merely a "compliance exercise" and losing its real purpose (Vogel, 2012). Valters (2014) recognizes the ample possibilities ToC offers in "doing development differently" however, the author raises the concern of "Theories of Change simply becoming another "corporate stick to beat people with" (Valters, 2014, p. 20). If not used correctly, ToC may lose its power and be not better than other methodologies (Vogel, 2012, p. 4).

Development projects can be penalized by their strict timelines and short durations (Ober, 2012). Working with ToC means carrying out theory-based processes. However, in practice it is challenging to gather valid data and evidence since such tasks need time (CARE, 2012). Moreover, ideally some of the data collection and evidence gathering processes should take

place even after the implementation phase has been completed (Ober, 2012, p. 9). ToC loses its strength since without robust data it becomes limited (Ober, 2012, p. 2).

ToC can be used inappropriately and present complex change in simple linear form, which hinders practitioners from addressing the complete picture (CARE, 2012, p. 10). International organizations using the same ToC in different settings in the world risk ignoring the key fact that different teams do not share the same objectives and understanding of ToC and hence are not able to contribute to the change aimed by the ToC (Davies, 2014, p. 102).

3. Methodology

This section presents the methodology adopted to investigate the research problem and the rationale behind the choice of research methods for identifying, collecting, and analysing data as well as the actions taken to achieve these. The research findings are based on the sixteen qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted.

3.1 Research philosophy and design

Epistemology serves as the underlying philosophy when studying development (Sumner & Tribe, 2004). More specifically this research applies a constructivist epistemological approach with the interviews being the selected research method. The interview conversation between the interviewer and the informants is a construction of knowledge (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 22). It mainly employs qualitative research and aims to investigate the ways existing evidence is being used in development practices.

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were used to allow for openness and flexibility in the sequence of posing questions and for putting more emphasis on specific input provided by the informants (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 150). Qualitative semi-structured interviews provide more in-depth information due to the possibility of the interviewer to probe and obtain more significant answers (Zorn, 2014). The option of using a questionnaire was excluded due to the disadvantages of the questionnaire such as the lack of possibility to probe or prompt explanations in the case of self-completion questionnaires (Bryman, 2012, p. 234).

3.2 Techniques and procedures

This section describes the research techniques and procedures opted for data collection and analysis.

3.2.1 Data collection

a) Literature review

A thorough literature review was undertaken through university's libraries search engine LUBsearch, along with Google Scholar and Google search engine. The phrase Theory of Change was used as key words for the search, which resulted in hundreds of thousands of hits. Given that the aim of this study is to research ToC in capacity development projects, a second group of key word used for finding relevant literature was Theory of Change + Capacity Development. This time the search resulted in a smaller number of hits, around twenty thousand hits. Under the same consideration, only literature related to Theory of Change in

relation to international development projects was selected for the study and eventually around seventy references were considered for the study. The literature review process was guided by the research purpose, the research objectives, and the research question, hence the components sought out were ToC definition, ToC understanding, ToC usage, ToC advantages and ToC challenges. The search targeted scholarly sources and publications by the non-profit sector.

b) Interviews

Qualitative semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015) were conducted with capacity development project managers from international organizations and capacity development advisors from donor agencies (see Table 3). The majority of the informants come from implementing organizations. Only three informants represent donor agencies. The initial goal was to involve around half of the informants from implementing organizations and the other half from donor agencies. However, during the process, it proved to be challenging to get access to and responses from donor agencies' representatives.

Table 4 List of organizations where informants come from

No.	Organization
1.	Emerald Network
2.	Florida International University, USA
3.	Independent Consultant
4.	LTH, Lund University
5.	Save the Children International (Albania)
6.	Save the Children International (Somalia)
7.	Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency - MSB
8.	Swedish Enforcement Authority
9.	Swedish Police Authority
10.	Swedish Red Cross
11.	Swedish Red Cross
12.	The Swedish Agency for Development Cooperation (SIDA)*
13.	The Swedish Agency for Development Cooperation (SIDA)
14.	The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)
15.	World Food Programme
16.	World Vision (Albania)

* The organizations in blue colour text are donor agencies. The remaining organizations are implementing organizations.

Initially, only development initiatives in disaster risk reduction and management were considered given that this study is part of the master's degree in Disaster Risk Management and Climate Change Adaptation. However, as the process progressed, it became clear that ToC concerned primarily project management processes for achieving social change and the thematic aspect (e.g. whether used for DRR initiatives or for initiatives addressing other themes) does not come out as making a difference. As per the initial consideration, the pool of informants consisted mainly of DRR practitioners due to the professional experience in DRR of both the student and the supervisor from whose networks the contacts were obtained.

All informants possessed extensive professional experience, ranging from ten to forty years of work experience in the international development sector. Purposive sampling (Bryman, 2016, p. 408) was applied to establish the list of informants. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to conduct sampling based on the specific groups or units of the research question (Bryman, 2012, p. 416). Eight informants were initially identified. Further, the snowballing method was used, asking informants contacted initially whether they could recommend other contacts (Bryman, 2016, p. 415). Two people accepted to be interviewed but it was challenging to find a suitable time for the interview. Eventually, these two interviews were not conducted. Three persons did not respond to the invitation to be interviewed. Potential reasons for not responding might have been lack of time, lack of interest or unwillingness to be included in a research study.

Both implementing organizations and donor agencies were included for the purpose of obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the topic from both perspectives. For reaching out to the informants, I made use of my professional network with Save the Children in Albania where I have worked with capacity development projects. The support from my supervisor was crucial in reaching out to most of the informants, who came from his network of his professional experience with the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Swedish Network for learning about capacity development with Swedish Governmental Agencies.

Sixteen informants coming from thirteen organizations (see Table 3) were interviewed. Three of the organizations involved in the study were represented by two informants each. This fact was considered during the data analysis process in case any patterns of similarities would emerge between informants coming from the same organization. No common patterns were noticed which might be related to informants from the same organization working in different countries or having different levels of professional experience (e.g. number of years of work

experience) or experience of working with ToC depending on various circumstances (e.g. when their office might have been introduced to ToC or when the opportunity to work with ToC could have emerged in the portfolio of projects they have managed).

The interviews were planned to be around 30 minutes long and informants were asked to reserve 30-45 minutes in their schedule to allow for a little extra time if the need arose. The duration of the interviews varied from 25 minutes to 60 minutes with an average duration of 30 minutes. Fifteen of the interviews were conducted via Skype and over the telephone. One interview was conducted face to face. Challenges presented during Skype interviews were related to poor quality of connection and sometimes interruptions were experienced.

When approached to be invited for the interview, the informants were provided with an introductory letter which included a short background on the research study and planning information for the interview (see Appendix 1). Interviewees gave informed consent to be interviewed having been informed beforehand on the purpose of the research study, what to expect from the interview as well as what was expected of them. The informants were asked for permission to be recorded and they were ensured confidentiality of the interviews i.e. no names would be mentioned in the research project. In addition, research findings are presented in a way so that no statements can be traced to a specific informant or organization. The interviews were recorded using the Samsung Voice Recorder application which provided a smooth recording experience with high quality sound and editing options. Afterwards, the interviews in audio format were transcribed into text in a word document format.

c) Interview guide

An interview guide (see Table 4) was developed to facilitate the interview processes by providing a common point of reference and consistency during the interviews. The research purpose, its related objectives, the research question as well as preliminary insights gained by the literature review served as the foundation for compiling the interview guide. Before the first interview was conducted, the interview guide was tested with a practitioner working with capacity development projects. No changes were made to the interview guide questions after it was tested. However, a question was added to the interview guide at the end of the first interview. The first two questions concerned personal information of the informant regarding their current work and academic and professional background. These first questions served to collect information on the informants' profiles and at the same time they proved to be a good

start of the conversation to break the ice before transitioning to the topic-related questions. The next two questions pertained to project management processes and frameworks used to carry out such processes.

Then, the informants were asked on the ways they described how their programs lead to results. The purpose of this question was to learn about the ways informants explain how their work delivers the results they claim it does and whether they do this through a ToC approach. The question was formulated in this way inspired by the existing literature which considers ToC a suitable approach for describing how projects or programs lead to results (Bisits-Bullen, 2014 & Green, 2015). The next set of questions were specifically dedicated to Theory of Change addressing its definition and understanding; when ToC is used and how; advantages and challenges of ToC.

The last question of the interview was added at the end of the first interview. *Q: Would you like to add anything else with regards to the previous questions? Something from your experience or any examples that may come to your mind.* It came as a natural addition to the conversation and it was deemed suitable to include it in the interview guide, to allow informants the opportunity to share any additional thoughts and ideas or reiterate any concepts previously discussed.

Table 5 Qualitative semi-structured interview guide

Qualitative semi-structured interview guide

1. What is your name and current position?

2. What is your background?

3. What frameworks do you use in your project management processes?

   (Probing question) How do you design your capacity development projects?
   What methods do you use? How do the processes look like?

4. How do you describe how your programs lead to results?

   (Probing question) If ToC is mentioned – How would you define ToC? / If ToC
   is not mentioned – I don't know how much you use ToC, but what is your
   understanding of ToC?

5. Do you have any guidelines or manual of ToC?

6. At what stage during the project management do you use ToC and how?

7. What are advantages and disadvantages of working with ToC?

   (Probing question) Why do you think other organizations don't use ToC?

8. Would you like to add anything else with regards to the previous questions? Something
   from your experience or any examples that may come to your mind.

3.2.2 Data analysis

The NVivo software was used to analyse the data collected from the interviews. To facilitate the analyses process, the available data was categorized based on the interview guide and coded in the following six themes in the form of nodes: 1) frameworks used in project management processes, 2) ways organizations describe how their programs lead to results, 3) ToC definition and understanding, 4) when and how is ToC used, 5) ToC advantages and 6) ToC challenges. Afterwards, content in each theme was further categorized in the form of handwritten mind mapping. This preliminary categorization proved extremely helpful for being able to brainstorm and start the writing process of the results section. As the processes advanced, the results section was improved and presented in a more concise manner under the following themes: 1) ToC concept and understanding, 2) How and when ToC is used, and 3) Why ToC is used.

3.3 Research quality

3.3.1 Reliability and validity

Research findings have been based on the interviews conducted and an extensive literature review process of both scholarly sources and organizational publications (documents and guides).

3.3.2 Limitations

Considering the time available, a limited number of informants was involved, and it is important for such limitation to be recognized and reflected when reporting on the research findings. The results were coded and analysed only by the student which might involve biases that should be recognized. The use of snowballing sampling entails limitation of the target group since informants were identified through professional connections and further suggested by those initially identified. This means that the group of informants is homogenous which makes it less likely to represent a broader group (Bryman, 2016, p. 188). Given that the student knew some of the informants in previous professional capacities, might have influenced their answers to the interview questions.

4. Results

This section sets out the key findings and results harnessed from the sixteen qualitative semi-structured interviews. Results have been structured around the following three themes: 1) ToC concept and understanding 2) how and when ToC is used, and 3) why ToC is used.

4.1 ToC concept and understanding

4.1.1. ToC concept

Informants use the following terminology to refer to the ToC concept: a framework, a methodology, an approach, a vision, a theory, a philosophy, a story, a storyline, a process, an exercise, and a thinking. One informant says that change management strategy and ToC are used synonymously in the organization represented by the informant. With regards to conceptual understanding, the sixteen informants describe ToC in different ways. Eight informants describe ToC as the vision, a way of thinking, or philosophy in achieving the desired change aimed by the development initiatives, their organizations work towards. Four informants consider ToC a framework or a tool guiding development initiatives processes. The remaining four informants reflect on ToC as being a process where stakeholders and organization's teams work together to plan for and define the optimal pathways of going about achieving the aimed desired change. Two of these four informants speak about ToC both as a process and as a product developed at the end of the ToC process.

4.1.2 ToC understanding

Nine of sixteen informants understand the purpose of ToC is to indicate the aimed desired change and the necessary steps to take to move from the current situation to the aimed desired situation, including the underlying assumptions and efforts upon which the change will develop. Seven of these nine informants describe the ToC process as one where teams initially define the desired goal, outcome or aimed change and then work backwards to understand what is needed to reach the desired situation. One informant puts specific emphasis on ToC being a method based in outcomes and outputs. Five of the nine informants reflect on ToC as a thinking process that systematically guides project design and monitoring and evaluation. One of the informants explains this thinking process to be encountered in the following forms: description of the aimed change, description of the ways how the organizations plan to achieve the aimed change, what is needed, what are the logical steps and lastly description of

how the change will happen. The remaining four informants understand ToC as a process where stakeholders come together to operationalize their strategic vision.

Seven informants described their understanding and definition of ToC as either 1) ToC is the description of the change we aim to achieve through our development work; 2) ToC is the ultimate vision or desired change used for working your way back to operationalizing this vision or change in practical terms; or 3) ToC is an organization's story about how it envisages that the change will happen. One informant explains ToC by equating it to the change envisioned in the development initiatives. The informant considers ToC a vision which is translated into a storyline and uses the following example to explain further: "The storyline is that you have an issue for example with flooding where people are affected, their assets are destroyed, and their lives are put at risk. Your Theory of Change is that you would love to see these people be prepared from this flood risks occurring in the future." One informant shares these five consecutive principles for how to encapsulate ToC: "1) Where are you now? 2) Where would you like to get in the future? 3) How are you prepared to get there? 4) The underlying assumptions? 5) "And can you put a diagram that captures all of that?"

When reflecting on the ways ToC fits in the broader picture of organizational processes, six informants see ToC as a theoretical, visionary, or philosophical approach complementary to other logic models or frameworks, for example the LFA. Four of these informants consider ToC a theoretical methodology attached to practical elements of project management such as strategies, plans, activities, or outputs.

Twelve of sixteen informants speak of ToC as a very useful approach or methodology for developing better projects. Though, nine of these informants think that the challenge in working with ToC lies in how sufficiently practitioners make use of it i.e. whether the necessary time is dedicated, all possible pathways of change it offers are explored, all underlying assumptions are made explicit and so on. Four of these nine informants think that ToC concept is not completely clear, and they are aware of various meanings attached to the concept. One informant preferred to speak in comparative terms with regards to how ToC is perceived in an ideal version and how it is used in reality. The informant further explained that there is a wide gap between the ideal ToC use and its real use, and often practitioners are aware of this gap.

However, five informants recognize ToC to be a relatively difficult and complex method to work with. Two of these informants think that ToC is too abstract, theoretical, or philosophical, which raises doubts when organizations need to operationalize it. According to the five informants, practitioners need to receive specific training on how to work with ToC and how to use ToC effectively. The challenge according to the informants is related to lack of training about ToC and organizations not investing the necessary time and capacity building workshops to train their staff on how to work with ToC. Two informants further recommend that organizations need to dedicate specific capacity development activities about ToC for their staff members.

Eight informants put strong emphasis on the ToC underlying assumptions. According to them, assumptions need to be recognized and they should be articulated clearly and explicitly in the ToC. One of the informants stresses the "assumptions on how to get where you want to be". Four informants share that ToC is the driver of their work considering it indispensable for carrying out capacity development projects. A key pattern found in the feedback by these four informants was that of ToC allowing for the articulation of clear and explicit assumptions. In addition to clear and explicit assumptions, two informants highlight change processes, pathways of change and domains of change as key elements that constitute ToC as an approach. According to the informants, ToC suitability in working with complex initiatives stands in the space it allows for change to be planned for through multiple processes. Furthermore, informants elaborate on the different pathways of change that can be followed to go about reaching the long-term impact desired aimed change. One of the informant explains domains of change in relation to specific policies or thematic areas within the organization that ToC aims to address.

Four informants share that when working with ToC and with results in general, it is of paramount importance to define and distinguish between different types of results. They say the differentiation can be made in a temporal scale: short, medium, and long-term results and that each of the three levels are dealt with differently in terms of the needed time for organizations to own their achievements. One of these informants says that results can also be divided in different categories, for example, physical, behavioural (people change behaviour), job performance-related (for instance, people work more effectively after having received training), mindset change-related (people look at certain phenomena with a more open mind after participating in awareness-raising activities) etc.

4.2 How and when ToC is used

Nine of sixteen informants mention ToC when asked about the project management (PM) frameworks they use in their work. Nine informants state to be using the Logical Framework Approach (LFA). Seven informants use a combination of ToC and the LFA. Other answers provided to the PM frameworks used are the following: the project management cycle, results-based management, organizational strategy, feasibility study, needs assessment, risk analysis matrix, situation analysis, capacity needs mapping, outcomes mapping, results framework, results chain, and the most significant change.

All sixteen informants say that they are aware of ToC, have heard of it, and have an understanding of ToC. However, two of them say that they do not use ToC in their work. They instead use results frameworks and the LFA respectively because they are more familiar with these approaches or think other approaches are better and more efficient.

When asked about levels of ToC use, informants say ToC is used at different levels: global/worldview (international organizations operating in many countries/regions in the world apply their ToC in every country/region where they work), national/organizational (ToC is based on national development priorities), programme (ToC addresses many initiatives of the same theme) and project (ToC of the smallest scale, used for a specific project).

4.2.1 ToC programme or project level

Nine of sixteen informants use ToC throughout the project management cycle. The nine informants believe that it is important to start working with a ToC approach from the early stages of project design, planning, and inception. One informant explains that ToC is included before designing projects, because teams need to research and "start making assumptions how change will happen" before designing relevant initiatives. Another informant says that project design and planning are shaped around ToC. The same informant elaborates on ToC considered during implementation saying that projects are implemented "with a ToC thinking behind every activity". Three informants describe ToC presence during implementation as one where initially identified pathways of change are tested and if needed reconsidered or altered. The three informants say that in the evaluation stage, ToC is used as a baseline and teams validate the ToC by servicing the previously made assumptions. One informant explains that when reporting, expect for the project framework, the organization also considers ToC.

One informant says that ToC was introduced into their work recently (2-3 years ago) to address donor requirements and reporting, hence the organization is mainly using ToC in the monitoring and evaluation, and reporting stage. Another informant says that in their organization ToC is integrated in the design phase and again later in the reporting phase. They do not incorporate ToC during implementation, which could be improved according to the informant.

Six informants see ToC as a theoretical, visionary, or philosophical approach complementary to other approaches or frameworks such as the LFA. Four of these informants consider ToC a theoretical methodology attached to practical elements of project management such as strategies, plans, activities, or outputs. Five of the six informants reported that ToC, the LFA or results framework have helped their work in articulating how results are delivered and how the desired change is achieved. One of the informants provides a broader description of how programs can lead to results: *"Organizations can achieve results if they recognize they are not the only actor, but they are making a contribution to the big change… this way of thinking helps to better evaluate the work".* The informant further elaborates that how organizations work with results has changed, i.e. in the past organizations wanted to measure everything and they would evaluate by checking boxes whereas today organizations have become more selective and they try to measure the most critical areas and instead of checking predefined boxes, they evaluate how things have worked out or not and what was changed.

4.2.2 ToC organizational level

Three informants consider ToC the bridge linking the organizational strategy with goals and objectives the strategy aims to achieve, with ToC enabling the process of bringing the strategy to life by operationalizing it from an ideal vision to tangible steps and components. One of these informants added that ToC makes possible a combination of the necessary conditions for change to take place. The informant further elaborates that it depends on the project whether change management strategy or theory of change is used. The informant says that change management strategy and theory of change are used synonymously and either one or the other is used depending on the projects.

Seven informants say that claiming results of their projects/programs is one of the most challenging and sensitive areas of work. When asked how they describe how their programs lead to results, all informants reflected on the interrelatedness between different elements and phases of project management for elaborating on how programs lead to results. Seven informants share that ToC helps them to develop and describe this interrelatedness. One

informant (donor agency representative) shares that the plausibility and interrelatedness between different elements is expected to be present in the applications by partner organizations so that funding can be approved. The donor agency does not require partners to elaborate on their ToC per se, however the informant says that ToC is usually present in the successful applications, whether referred to with the ToC terminology specifically or not.

Five of the nine informants (who use ToC throughout the PM cycle) say they work with ToC while developing their organizational strategies and ToC is the underlying thinking upon which the strategies are built. The five informants think that ToC approach is especially useful when working at strategic levels. Two of the informants emphasizes that ToC is used even earlier, when evaluating completed project and drawing lessons to consider when designing and planning for the new strategy. The two informants share that their organizations start thinking about ToC while conducting assessments preceding the strategy development. The two informants explain how the preliminary assessments feed the strategy and ToC serves to structure this process by providing a clearer picture of the current situation, the desired situation, and the necessary change to reach there. Three informants who use ToC during strategy development say that a second key moment when ToC is used is when projects are designed, in line with finalized strategies. The ToC thinking leads the project design/planning process in the same way it has been reflected in the organization's strategy. One of the informants further shares: "ToC is embedded into the project design thinking when we submit proposals to donors."

4.2.3 ToC worldview level

Five informants who use ToC at a global level, consider ToC an overarching approach to be translated into every country program where the organization works at a global level and at the same time they recognize the necessity to tailor ToC for addressing context specific challenges of the locations where projects are implemented.

4.3 Why ToC is used

Six informants emphasize that for programs to have results, every project management phase needs to be carried out carefully: suitable baselining, robust program design, correct program planning, tailored specifically to the dynamics of the context and to the challenges addressed, using the proper methods. Four of these six informants believe that the rationale of the initiatives is articulated in the ToC. One of the informants summarized the feedback on how programs lead to results stating that the organization does this through its change management strategies or its theory of change. The same four informants say that how programs lead to results is a smooth relation between activities leading to outputs, outputs bringing outcomes, outcomes help organizations reach the goals and reaching goals has an impact in the broader development agenda. Two of the informants further explain how links and relationships between these elements can help teams describe how their programs lead to results. Ten informants consider ToC useful for working with visionary and strategic issues. Four of them claim that having a common ToC provides a unified approach across countries and regions of the world were the organizations operate. Three informants state that ToC brings clear vision to the development projects and it allows more meaningful work to be carried out.

Five informants say that ToC helps in tailoring development initiatives more carefully to addressing the beneficiaries' needs and specific local dynamics of the context where these initiatives are implemented. One of the informants thinks that ToC helps organizations understand the underlying constrains that might be out of your control and adapt the initiatives accordingly. The informant further elaborates that ToC helps to have a more realistic view of how change happens, and it can be adapted to circumstances.

Five informants consider ToC useful because they think ToC is based on evidence from research and it is built on theoretical underlying foundations which make it a strong approach. One informant says that ToC helps to explain to interested parties the functionality of the chosen approaches by the organization to go about managing programs because of ToC being "academically sound and robust". Another informant thinks that ToC serves to help people understand the desired change.

4.3.1 Complexity

Seven informants steer their discussion on ToC towards the idea of uncertainty and complexity, considering ToC useful for designing and developing projects that are suitable to address the increasing complexity in the international development sector. One of the

informants refers to ToC as "the best framework we have invented so far, to design for uncertain and complex world". Another informant explains the suitability of ToC in addressing complexity by defining it as "a chain of endless processes and pathways of change". The informant further explains how ToC gives the possibility to visualize how one output is followed by another type of activity, further by another outcome and a chain of actions is established that can finally lead to a particular impact. One informant (donor agency representative) thinks that different frameworks are suitable for different settings depending on the level of complexity, i.e. "If you implement something that is very predictable, for example delivering vaccines or building roads, maybe a logical framework approach would be useful, whereas if you support something that is very complex like advocacy or democracy assistance, other methods such as outcome mapping are more useful".

4.3.2 Partnerships, ownership, and sustainability

Nine informants think that developing projects using ToC is a stakeholder driven process which nourishes sustainable partnerships among actors and stakeholders involved. As one informant explained, the strength in partnerships lies in the fact that change aspired in this way is co-owned by everyone involved. The informant further elaborates that the process runs more smoothly since collaborating partners learn to "speak the same language" from the inception phases of development projects. Another informant said that "ToC enhances communication between stakeholders since the process ends with the visualization of how stakeholders see change happen."

The five informants who reported to start working with ToC when developing the organizational strategies (in the *How and when ToC is used* section above) elaborate on the strategy development process as one where actors operating at different capacities are consulted and involved. One informant refers to the collaboration and communication among various stakeholders as "a long process of dialogue". Four of the informants consider ToC the result of common efforts where everyone's views have been considered and at the same time each actor needs to show collaboration and accountability through the process, which guarantees more robust and sustainable results. Two informants consider ToC useful for making the logical connection between the aspired change at a strategy level and how this is translated to smaller scale change aimed by individual projects.

Five informants put emphasis on the sustainability element, claiming that working through a ToC has helped their organizations design and carry out initiatives with higher sustainability outlooks due to more efforts and dedication put in the early stages. One of the informants further elaborates by linking sustainability to the legacy the organization leaves behind and how ToC has helped the organization better articulate the constituting components of this legacy, i.e. "One of the advantage of ToC is the thinking around sustainability and long-term impact. ToC gives you the benefit of thinking big and long-term."

4.3.3 Donor requirement

Five informants bring up the potential requirements imposed by the donor agencies. They think that the ways programs lead to results depend substantially by the type of project and more importantly by the set criteria and expectations of the funding donors. One informant distinguishes between tangible results achieved through delivering particular outputs versus more abstract outcomes solidifying the long-term impact, and both are required by donors despite the duration of the initiative. The informant says practitioners can be required to work with different types of results within the same project i.e. "There is no consistency regarding what are the kind of results that you expect from a project". The same informant shares that it is exactly when thinking of results that ToC is useful the most, i.e. "at this precise moment teams start thinking about the purposes they are planning for, who is their audience, who is financing the program (what do they want you to accomplish?), who are the beneficiaries and so forth… here identification of different stakeholders starts."

Three informants believe that the reason organizations use ToC is because "it sounds fancy and appealing" to include across project documents or because the donor agencies require it in a mandatory fashion. Two informants shared that ToC is not enough if used in isolation, but it needs to be used in combination with other project management methods for ToC to provide the underlying program theories and philosophy and the other methods to guarantee a comprehensive structure for making projects operational.

5. Discussion of Results

This chapter discusses the understanding project managers and capacity development advisors have of ToC and how they utilize and incorporate ToC into their development initiatives.

5.1 ToC concept and understanding

The findings of this study confirm the confusion and ambiguity around the ToC concept suggested by the literature (Stein & Valters, 2012; Mulgan, 2016). Informants use diverse terminology to refer to ToC, using the following nouns: a concept, a framework, a methodology, an approach, a vision, a theory, a philosophy, a story, a storyline, a process, an exercise, a thinking, and a change management strategy.

The ambiguity around the ToC concept does not only affect what organizations consider ToC but might also define how and when ToC is used. Moreover, an ambiguous ToC might have negative implications in the communication and collaboration among different actors working towards a shared vision (Davies, 2004) and in the effectiveness of the work carried out (Taplin et al., 2013). Hivos (2015) distinguishes between ToC as "a way of thinking", "a process" and "a product" (Hivos, 2015, p.13). The terminology used by informants can be categorized in these three groups. However, it is important to note that while elaborating on their ToC understanding, most of the informants (fourteen of sixteen) choose just one of the purposes they understand ToC to be used for i.e. they only speak about ToC as a way or thinking or only as a process or only as a product. Only two informants speak of ToC both as a process and as a product and no informant distinguishes between the three ToC purposes.

As presented in the results chapter, most of the informants (nine of sixteen) provided a broad picture of how the ToC process looks like, starting with initially defining the long-term envisioned change and continuing by reflecting on the efforts and the steps needed to be undertaken to reach to a desired situation. Seven informants speak about ToC as a "backward looking" approach where after the long-term goal has been identified, teams map backward what is needed to achieve the identified goal. Looking at ToC as a backward-looking approach is in line with how ToC is considered in the existing literature too (Taplin et al., 2013; Hivos, 2015; Mulgan, 2016).

Most of the informants do not provide comprehensive definitions similar to the ones encountered in the literature (see *Table 2 Definitions of Theory of Change*). Only four of the

sixteen informants provide statements that can be considered complete ToC definitions. While it is understandable for practitioners to not know by heart complete definitions of all concepts they work with, the difficulty in defining ToC clearly, might also be related to the challenges perceived around the ToC approach. Nine informants consider ToC a difficult and challenging approach to work with. Lack of complete ToC definitions witnessed among the informants might also be related to the ambiguity around the ToC concept. The ambiguity around ToC witnessed among practitioners might put at stake the whole purpose of ToC together with the novelty and advantageous features ToC is thought to bring. The fact that practitioners might feel intimidated by ToC might indicate a limited or artificial use of the approach, again risking turning it into a compliance exercise (Vogel, 2012).

Except for addressing complexity, explicit assumptions and multiple pathways of change upon which ToC is based help organizations articulate their vision more clearly. Three informants believe that ToC enables them to carry out more meaningful work. According to some of the informants, having the possibility to develop initiatives in many directions through various pathways of change provides space for reflecting more in depth and delivering meaningful work.

5.2 How and when ToC is used

As mentioned earlier, fourteen of sixteen informants use ToC and two of the informants do not use ToC in their work. All sixteen informants shared their understanding of the ToC concept as well as when and how ToC is or can be used in practice. However, it's important to recognize that most of the input in this section is by the fourteen informants who use ToC and less from the two informants who don't use ToC. Referring to the different levels at which the ToC processes can be aimed i.e. worldview, organizational, thematic (domain) and programme or project level (see Figure 3) the focus during the interviews was mainly on the organizational and programme or project levels, as it has been laid out in the results chapter.

5.2.1 ToC programme or project level

Most informants state to be using ToC throughout the project management cycle. As some of the informants reflect, ToC is used for planning and designing purposes; it is monitored and tested during implementation, and it informs the evaluation and reporting phases of project management. Two informants do not use ToC during implementation. They use ToC only

during monitoring and evaluation and only during design and monitoring and evaluation respectively.

Like the findings of this study, the existing literature is divided on the temporal aspect of ToC. Hivos (2015), Davies (2004), and Keystone (n.d.) speak about the importance of ToC being used throughout the project management cycle of development initiatives because of the relations between various stages in project management. For example, the design and planning phase serves to establish how the initiative at hand will contribute to the desired change (Dhillon & Vaca, 2018, p. 68). In this initial stage teams start making assumptions about the underlying foundation of their chosen pathways, which are constantly updated as the processes advances (Green, 2016, p. 236). The assumptions are monitored and adjusted meaningfully if they have been made early in the process and eventually validated when conducting evaluations and reporting (Dhillon & Vaca, 2018).

Others such as Weiss (1995), Rogers (2008) and organizations such as New Philanthropy Capital (2012) or Innovation Network (2016) put stronger emphasis on ToC during evaluation. Weiss early work on ToC emerged to primarily address insufficiencies in evaluation practices (Weiss, 1995, p. 82). However, ToC is increasingly being used earlier in the process and not only when evaluating programs (Hivos, 2015; Keystone, n.d., and Taiplin et al., 2013).

From the findings, it is not very clear to what extent ToC is used during the implementation phase. One informant talked about implementing projects with "a ToC thinking behind every activity". However, the same informant said that the LFA is used extensively in the organization. Keeping in mind that half of the informants describe ToC as a way of thinking or as a vision or a philosophy, and at the same time most of the informants report to be using logic models or frameworks such as the LFA. It might be productive to conclude that the logic frameworks are used for performing practical elements of project management while ToC guides the PM process as a way of thinking or accompanying visionary approach (Clark & Anderson, 2004). Moreover, four informants specifically reflected on ToC being a philosophical approach attached to the practical elements of project management such as objectives, activities, outcomes, or outputs. Three other informants considered ToC as "the bridge" linking the organizational strategy with goals and objectives the strategy aims to achieve, with ToC enabling the process of bringing the strategy to life by operationalizing it from an ideal vision to tangible steps and components (Blamey & Mackenzie, 2007).

As the results show, in many cases ToC is used complementary to logic models or frameworks e.g. the LFA. However, from the collected data it is not possible to confidently draw conclusions on how these methods are used together i.e. what is each of them used for and what is the contribution each of the methods bring in carrying out more effective initiatives. Given that many sources from the existing literature (Green, 2015; Rogers 2008 and James, 2011) present ToC as a new approach replacing more commonly used ones such as the LFA, the potential complementary use of ToC with the LFA might have been underestimated. Looking at the research process in retrospect, one question about ToC and the LFA (or other logic models) complementary use could have been added to the interview guide.

All nine informants who use ToC throughout the project management cycle put strong emphasis on ToC use throughout the stages. Importance of ToC use throughout project management can also be supported by the ToC understandings informants share. For instance, all the sixteen informants spoke about the interrelatedness between various elements and temporal aspects when describing how programs lead to results. Moreover, seven informants particularly discussed that ToC helps them in creating this interrelatedness in the initiatives.

It is worth arguing that employing ToC only in one stage and not throughout the project management cycle would be counterproductive (Green, 2016). For example, while it is useful dedicating time to making explicit assumptions and supporting them on evidence during the design phase, the dedicated time might be futile if assumptions are not revisited and altered in accordance with potential changes in the context that might have arisen. This would be a poor use of ToC which as Vogel (2012) warned, it can threaten even powerful approaches such as the ToC.

The same thinking is valid for pathways of change. Pathways of change are described as a distinguishable component of ToC by the informants and as some of them explain, pathways of change make ToC suitable for working with complex interventions (Anderson, 2005). If using ToC in isolation i.e. only during a specific project management stage and not throughout the cycle, this would mean pathways of change are not utilized fully. The plausibility and interrelatedness mentioned above would be hard to achieve if ToC is only used in monitoring and evaluation. ToC illustrates the relationship and the sequence of interlinked elements through its pathways of change (Anderson, 2005). Through its pathways of change, ToC makes it easier to understand what needs to be accomplished for change to be achieved (O'Flynn, 2012). If teams start thinking about ToC and the constituting pathways of

change when they prepare to evaluate or to report to donors, there might run the risk of basing their ToC on ready-made documents, failing to recognize specific factors of the context and unique characteristics of the development issue at hand. These ways of incorporating ToC would make ToC completely obsolete because this would mean that the core ToC components (e.g. working iteratively with multiple processes; following endless pathways of change etc) would be ignored. Most of the informants (nine of sixteen) share that while they consider ToC approach or method useful, at the same time ToC might be challenging to work with. ToC is not a "magic bullet" and more important than the approach can be the way ToC is used (Vogel, 2012). As with any project management approach, ToC can be used successfully but it can also be used poorly (Green, 2012). Informants bring attention to the difficulty of working with ToC and how sometimes practitioners can feel intimidated by ToC. Four informants shared their awareness on the existence of many different ToC meanings and definitions when reflecting on their own ToC understanding. Some of the informants are transparent about the ideal use of ToC they envision, and the actual use their organizations carry out and they recognize the need for doing better.

5.2.2 ToC organizational level

Most of the informants (ten of sixteen) consider ToC very useful for working with visionary and strategic issues. Referring to the levels of ToC use by Hivos (2015) in Figure 2, ToC use for visionary and strategic issues falls mainly under 'organizational ToC'. As Hivos (2015) would suggest, this level entails aligning ToC with the organization's mission, vision, values, and its contribution to the broader social change.

Keeping in mind that most of the informants are project managers (i.e. working in certain thematic areas) one could expect that they would mainly speak of ToC use at a thematic (domain) or programme/project level. Reasons, why most of the informants choose to discuss ToC usage at an organizational level, could be linked to the fact that their organizations employ ToC at an organizational level and complement the process with the logic frameworks which guide the programme/project level. Nine informants did mention the LFA when asked about project management frameworks used.

Another potential reason to why informants highlight the visionary and strategic use of ToC might be related to informants describing their overall understanding and knowledge about ToC rather than how ToC is being used in their organizations (as discussed in the *ToC*

concept, definition, and understanding section above). Hence, not simply how informants themselves use ToC but how their organizations use ToC. This premise can be supported by the fact that only two informants mention domains of change in the interview. Domains of change are particularly relevant when working with ToC in a thematic level (Global Focus, 2015). The general perception around all interviews is that ToC is used at an organizational level and in a few cases a program or project level.

Many international organizations operating in various contexts globally have one (the same) organizational ToC that is used across the countries where the organization operates. (Davies, 2012). Four informants see this a positive aspect since it enables the organization to apply a unified approach in all country offices it carries out programs. While the unifying element might be a positive outcome of a common ToC, organizations need to be cautious about applying the same ToC to contexts that differ substantially in the nature of development challenges and priorities addressed and not to mention socio-economic-political factors that are context specific for every country or region in the world. Davies (2004) raised the concern about scale and representation of ToC resulting in organizations not being able to plan accurately and what is even more challenging, to measure the achieved results (Davies, 2004, p. 101).

5.3 Why ToC is used

5.3.1 Complexity
The findings indicate that its suitability for complex development interventions and settings is what makes ToC stand out. The informants think that developing projects through a ToC approach helps to address the increasing complexity in the international development sector. Most of the informants reflect on ToC being suitable in allowing for enough effort to be put throughout the project management cycle to tackle complexity and uncertainty. Previous studies have also recognized ToC usefulness in establishing and tackling complex aspect of programmes (Vogel, 2012, p. 49). ToC strength in addressing complexity is brought up in many comprehensive ToC reviews such as Hivos (2015), Vogel (2012), James (2011) and Anderson (2005) to name a few. ToC usefulness in working with complex initiatives dates to its origin and first use by programme theorists such as Carol Weiss when addressing evaluation challenges around comprehensive community initiatives during the early 1990s. The growing usage of ToC in development initiatives (Noble, 2017) can be understood in line

with the increasing complexity prevalent in the international development sector and the need to address challenges arising from such complex picture (Dudar et al., 2017).

According to the informants, the novelty in tackling complexity challenges while developing programs through a ToC approach lies in the space ToC allows for working iteratively through multiple processes and many pathways of change. Both the informants of this study and voices from the existing literature (Green, 2012; Hivos, 2015) speak about components of ToC such as multiple processes approach and pathways of change giving organizations the possibility to work at different levels and follow an endless number of results chains to go about achieving the desired change. Around half of the informants reflect on ToC as an approach that has helped them address the elements of complexity in their development programs through the possibility of working with multiple processes and pathways of change. Informants mention a number of strong features of ToC to explain concretely how ToC makes possible to work with complex programs. These advantageous characteristics of ToC are also discussed in relation to limitations of other frameworks and approaches used in development projects. A considerable body of literature (Green, 2012; Bisit-Bullen, 2014; Roger, 2008) speaks about ToC as a "remedy" to the weakness of logic models/frameworks in their limitation because of being too linear and too simplistic to address the complex picture in international development.

As some informants reflect, ToC itself as an approach is based on a complex net of possibilities for considering how to go about addressing development challenges and finding solutions to the problem at hand. ToC gives teams the opportunity to work together and articulate their perspectives clearly, which enhances communication and accountability across teams (CARE International, 2012).

When developing programs through a ToC approach, the rationale has to be based on explicit assumptions based on evidence. Assumptions have undoubtedly always been part of development initiatives (Mulgan, 2016). However, the novelty with ToC is that assumptions need to be clear, explicit, and formulated carefully based on research evidence (New Philanthropy Capital). Moreover, as some of the informants explain, assumptions have to be tested throughout project management and changed, altered or adapted accordingly. Clear assumptions are the grounding foundation for good design and planning, which leads to a well-planned implementation phase, which are further vital for successful monitoring and evaluation processes (Vogel, 2012). Nine informants discuss the formulation of explicit assumptions as a key feature of developing programs through a ToC approach. Given that

programs have to be based on research evidence, it is safe to say, ToC serves as the underlying theoretical foundation for development initiatives. As one informant shared, ToC can give practitioners the confidence to explain their chosen philosophy and direction and "defend" this decision as one being academically sound and based on research evidence.

ToC cannot be understood without its inherent pathways of change, a crucial component in working through a ToC approach (Hivos, 2015). As mentioned earlier, linearity and simplicity of various logic models and frameworks (i.e. the LFA and others) in addressing development challenges which are anything but linear and simple, has been considered a hefty limitation of these frameworks (Chambers & Pettit, n.d.). Seven informants put special emphasis on ToC usefulness for designing and developing programs in the uncertain and complex context of international development. As one informant explained, ToC allows to present the complex picture in the form of "a chain of endless processes and pathways of change" which show the possible ways towards the aimed desired change.

5.3.2 Partnerships, ownership, and sustainability

Most of the informants (nine of sixteen) consider ToC a participatory "stakeholder-driven" approach reflecting on the many processes where different actors come to work together for developing ToC. The ToC designing processes adds transparency to collaboration between actors, clarifying expectations of their roles and responsibilities early in the process (Dhillon & Vaca, 2018, p. 68). Informants recognize that ToC development is a demanding process, given the time and effort teams need to dedicate to it, however, they believe it can benefit teams in many ways. As some of the informants elaborated, the ToC process brings stakeholders together which helps to enhance communication and build long-term partnerships. Previous studies also point out the communication across teams as a benefit of the ToC process (Taiplin et al., 2013; Global Focus, 2015; Green, 2013). Stakeholders engage in a long process of consultation where ToC is designed and further refined to the point actors deem it to be impactful (Keystone, 2009, p. 28). Informants think that being involved since the early stages of inception, stakeholders have ownership over the processes and the product. One informant said that collaborating partners "learn to speak the same language". An added interpretation of this equal standing between stakeholders might also be a positive impact on the power balance between partners (Ober, 2012). ToC is considered suitable for taking into consideration the specificities of the local context (CARE International, 2012) since it allows for ample time and effort to be dedicated to discovering and addressing the characteristics of

the local reality and tailoring projects accordingly for a more impactful result (Dhillon & Vaca, 2018). In the same line of thinking, the informants emphasize that dedicating time to developing projects through ToC allows for creating robust interrelatedness between different elements of the project (DANIDA, 2014).

Development initiatives carried out through a ToC approach have better chances of being sustainable considering the long, thoughtful efforts dedicated to incorporating research evidence to the base the articulation of assumptions, articulating assumptions explicitly in the ToC and choosing the most appropriate pathways of change to go about achieving results. The strong foundations laid in the beginning make the processes run more smoothly.

While it is understandable how the above elements make ToC an attractive approach, many of its features can easily hold true of other frameworks as well (Green, 2015). A gap is noted between the praiseworthy ways ToC is discussed and justification of why such praise is reserved solely to ToC (Mulgan, 2016). This finding is also valid for the existing literature where ToC is presented as a very strong approach but at the same time it is not fully exemplified what is so unique about it.

5.3.3 ToC as a donor requirement

Five informants reflect on the ToC choice as one imposed by donor agencies. One informant mentions specifically that the organization started using ToC as a donor requirement. As Vogel (2012) warned, practitioners need to be careful about their motives for using ToC. If made mandatory by donor agencies, ToC risks turning into nothing more than a compliance exercise (Vogel, 2012). As one informant said, the donor agency the informant represents does not include ToC in the calls for application because what would happen if they did is simply organizations hiring consultants to develop a ToC which would rather be an artificial addition. According to this informant, the team evaluating proposals is able to tell whether the proposal has or doesn't have included a valid ToC, whether ToC is mentioned explicitly or not.

Neither the informants of this study nor the existing literature provides clear insights on what it means for donors to require ToC in a mandatory fashion. It is hard to draw valid conclusions based on the collected data. However, ToC use as a donor requirement is scarcely explained by informants. ToC used due to being required by donors needs further evaluation on the implications it might have.

5.3.4 Reflection and ideas for further research

- Other potential options about choice of research methods given the nature of this research study need to be recognized. For example, another viable way of going about researching the ToC approach could have been analysis of organizational documents (e.g. proposals of projects where ToC is used or donors' calls for application where ToC is required). A possible idea for materializing this research plan could be to consider a ToC theoretical framework (e.g. Hivos, 2015 or other) and analyse project proposals based on this framework. This type of investigation could serve as an idea for future research on the topic.

- ToC use in relation to other methods needs to be further looked at. The existing unclarity on ToC use with other methods could benefit from future research.

- Another idea for further research is to investigate on the ToC use due to being required by donors in a mandatory fashion i.e. what are the reasons for imposing ToC as a mandatory requirement and what are the implications of employing a ToC approach because it has been required versus to employing ToC because it is considered an effective approach.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to generate a better understanding of how ToC is incorporated and utilized in capacity development projects. Sixteen qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with project managers from international organizations and capacity development advisors from donor agencies to learn how they utilize and incorporate ToC in capacity development projects. The findings confirm the existing ambiguity around the ToC concept. ToC is considered suitable for working with complex interventions and it is often utilized at visionary and strategic levels. ToC suitability in tackling complexity lays in the space it provides for working iteratively through multiple processes, explicit assumptions based on research evidence and endless pathways of change for how to go about achieving the desired change. Considering the four ToC levels (worldview, organizational, thematic (domain), and programme or project) this study shows ToC is mainly used at an organizational level and in some cases at a programme or project level. ToC at the organizational level informs development and operationalization of strategies. ToC at programme or project level is utilized throughout the project management cycle and stages are connected to one another i.e. assumptions and pathways of change are made during the design phase, they are tested and modified accordingly during implementation and validated during evaluation. In some cases, programme or project level ToC is incorporated only in the evaluation stage.

Often ToC is used complementary to other frameworks such as the LFA. In these cases, the LFA serves to guide the implementation process of the practical aspects of project management while ToC helps to oversee the envisioned change. It seems like organizations would benefit a ToC approach when using it complementary to the LFA or other relevant frameworks. The ways ToC and the other frameworks could best complement each-other would be specific to the levels of ToC use and nature of development initiative as well as level of complexity the initiative might entail.

Challenges in employing a ToC approach relate to ToC considered a difficult and complex method to work with. Exploring ToC components extensively requires time and effort and might be a tedious process. Moreover, there is ambiguity around the ToC concept and confusion on the ToC purpose i.e. whether ToC is "a way of thinking, a process, a product or a combination of them". Practitioners may feel perplexed and intimidated by ToC. Sometimes ToC is imposed as a donor requirement and it risks turning into merely a compliance exercise instead. ToC is not a magic bullet and practitioners need to be cautious and understand that ToC can be misused just like any other methods.

The following recommendations are provided in the framework of this study:

1. Given the high level of ambiguity around the ToC concept, it is necessary for practitioners to articulate clearly the definition and understanding of ToC.

2. Organizations need to be clear and upfront on the purpose of ToC i.e. whether they use ToC as a way of thinking, a process, a product or other.

3. Organizations also need to be clear about the level at which they aim the ToC process i.e. worldview, organizational, thematic (domain) and programme or project level.

4. When used as a complementary tool to other approaches, expectations around ToC contribution as well as how and when ToC will be used need to be spelled out clearly as early as possible in the process.

5. Theory of Change can be most useful when used throughout the project management cycle.

6. ToC needs to be revisited and reviewed accordingly as per changes in the context.

7. Practitioners need to dedicate time and energy to the ToC development process by bringing to life its components (i.e. exploring different pathways of change, turning hidden assumptions to explicit assumptions, and using research evidence whenever possible).

8. Organizations must invest in ToC platforms, train their staff on how to use ToC and how to work with ToC effectively.

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8. Appendices

8.1 Appendix 1 – Advance Letter to Key Informants

2018-02-14

LUND
UNIVERSITY

Advance Letter to Key Informants

Dear Key Informant:

My name is Irma Peta. I am a master student enrolled in the MSc programme in Disaster Risk Management and Climate Change Adaptation (DRMCCA) at Lund University in Sweden.

I am currently working with my master thesis project on Capacity Development for Disaster Risk Reduction. My supervisor is Magnus Hagelsteen, Lecturer and Director of the DRMCCA programme.

In my research, I am looking into project management frameworks used for managing capacity development projects and the ways organizations describe how their programs lead to results. Among others, I will address Theory of Change (ToC) approaches, to get a better understanding if and how ToC is utilized and incorporated in the project management process.

As part of my data collection process, I plan to conduct semi-structured interviews with project managers working in the field and advisors from donor agencies. To this end, **I would like to kindly ask if you would be willing to be interviewed in the context of my master thesis project.** Your support would be an immense help for my studies and I greatly appreciate it.

The interview will last around 30 minutes. It will take place via Internet (Skype or other preferred communication mediums) and it can be scheduled at your flexibility. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me anytime.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Irma Peta
Student
MSc candidate
Disaster Risk Management and Climate
Change Adaptation
Skype: irma.peta
Mobile: +46 70 916 42 36
irma.peta.3116@student.lu.se

Magnus Hagelsteen
Supervisor
Researcher & Director MSc programme
Disaster Risk Management and Climate
Change Adaptation
Division of Risk Management and Societal
Safety
Lund University Centre for Risk Assessment
and Management (LUCRAM)
Mobile: +46 70 383 55 85
magnus.hagelsteen@risk.lth.se

Postal address: Box 118, SE-221 00 Lund, Sweden Visiting address: John Ericssons väg 1, Lund, Sweden Mobile: +46 70 383 55 85
E-mail: magnus.hagelsteen@risk.lth.se Internet: http://www.risk.lth.se

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