

## **Employing a Theory of Change (ToC) approach for more effective development initiatives**

*Popular Science Summary*

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Theory of Change (ToC) is increasingly used in international development as a suitable planning and evaluation approach for carrying out more effective development initiatives. There is no agreed definition of Theory of Change, however, basic components can be found in various definitions. This study uses the following ToC definition by Patricia Rogers (2011), 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”.

The advantage of developing projects through ToC lies in the plausibility and interrelatedness ToC is said to bring between different elements and different phases of projects. Findings from interviews conducted with sixteen practitioners reveal that what makes ToC attractive is the space it provides for working iteratively, through multiple processes and endless pathways of change. ToC is considered a robust approach given that it is founded on explicit assumptions based on evidence from research. ToC remains an ambiguous concept and it is understood in different ways. The confusion around the concept brings up challenges also with regards to ToC purpose and how ToC fits into the broader picture of project management.

Interviewed informants use ToC mainly in the organizational and programme-project level. Other potential levels at which ToC can be aimed include worldview and thematic levels. With regards to a temporal scale, ToC is increasingly used throughout the project management cycle and in a few cases only during the monitoring and evaluation phase. ToC is used complementary to logic models such as the commonly used Logical Framework Approach (LFA) with the LFA guiding the practical elements of projects while the ToC is incorporated as an accompanying vision or philosophical underlying foundation.

Despite many acknowledged advantages, practitioners need to be aware that ToC is not a magic bullet and it can be misused just like any other method. At certain occasion, ToC is only used because it is made mandatory by donors, which risk for it to become a mere compliance exercise. In other cases, ToC is used because it is considered a fancy concept that everyone is using. Again, the risk of using it artificially is run. Considering the ambiguity and confusion around ToC and the intimidation this approach causes among many practitioners, it is necessary for organizations to invest in training their staff on how to use ToC effectively to make the most out of this important approach.

This study is useful for international development practitioners who work with ToC or would like to start employing a ToC approach in their work.