

Changing yourself, the world, and Belgian organizations

ToC workshop In Brussels

A while ago, a group of Belgian researchers and other actors working in international development work noticed a lack of collective reflection in their country on 'Theories of Change' (ToC), as an approach to better plan, follow, evaluate and learn from developmental processes. Therefore, the Research Institute for Work and Society (HIVA-KU Leuven), in collaboration with the Flemish Evaluation Platform (VEP), the NGO Federation en the Belgian Development Agency (BTC) organized a workshop in Brussels, inviting the Belgian NGO scene and other organizations, to advocate this new approach in planning, monitoring, evaluation (PM&E).

Marjan van Es (Hivos) and Simone van Vugt (Centre for Development Innovation, Wageningen University) were invited to speak and give a workshop. Both of them are a member of the ToC Programme Team, set up in 2010 to support Hivos in an action-learning process around ToC.

Huib Huyse, head of the research group on sustainable development at HIVA-KU Leuven, kicked off with a short introduction on ToC, or: "How change happens". He touched upon the weak link in the change strategies of many developmental organizations, namely, the assumption that trainings and workshops lead to changed organizational performance. Another example was that by giving 'context' more prominence, organizations should shift from 'best practices' towards 'best fits'. Here, ToC thinking could help to improve strategic choices.

After the keynote speech from Marjan van Es, senior policy officer Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning of Hivos, four separate workshops were offered. In one session, Simone van Vugt introduced the audience to the use of ToC in the East Africa Dairy Development Project. In an interactive setting, participants were asked to share their thoughts on changes for improvement of the Dairy sector in a set of countries. Next step was to assess the assumptions underlying those changes. One immediately noticed the multiple lenses people wear when they look at a certain concept; there are different pathways of change. Do small farmers benefit more from a formal or from an informal market? Will the land be used for fodder increase or will it be used for other products? By taking this as a starting point, Van Vugt made it easier to understand what ToC means and does in reality. As can be seen in the presentation, she links the ToC to the development of a result chain and a related PM&E framework.

Jan van Ongevalle, from HVA-KU Leuven, also used an example from his own work, to clarify what he called 'an actor-focused ToC'. Van Ongevalle showed, by means of visualization, how a distinction in different types of actors (in the sphere of control, sphere of influence and sphere of interest) can help in mapping situations of complex social change. The focus then lies on these different actors and the changes within them, or: "what do they, each differently, have to do to lead to durable change?"

In Van Es's keynote speech, we learned that at Hivos, exploration of ToC resulted from dissatisfaction with the logframe as an instrument for PME. Many Hivos staff and partner organizations thought the matrix restraining, linear and limited, and difficult to use. Because it consists of only three steps (result levels), logframes hardly capture the complexity of reality. In practice, we often see a big gap between long-term goals and an organization's daily

activities. How the activities will bring about the desired change is not clear. This is reinforced by the sector itself, being characterized by short-term thinking, excessive reporting and a complete focus on outputs. ‘Those who plan, those who execute, and those who write reports – are often three different persons who don’t really communicate about the purpose of the activities!’, says Marjan van Es. It characterizes the lack of a shared understanding and reflection on what the organization aims to achieve. ToC was seen as a potentially ‘ideal’ alternative. Well, ideal, if one does it right.

So, what is ToC exactly? This might be best captured in the cartoon found at the bottom of this page: we need to be more explicit about step two.

The core question in ToC is WHY? Constant follow-up questions about our assumptions need to be asked at one another. Often, we tend to ‘jump forward’, to focus only on the set goal and start action immediately. However, we need to pause and consider *why* we are choosing a certain strategy. For example, *why* do we want to promote small farmers in Kenya, in order to stop youngsters from moving to the city? *Why* don’t we want them to move to the city? *Why* do we refrain from working with this government, or with commercial companies? *Why* do we support dairy farmers? Et cetera.

A Theory of Change is both a process and a product; more specifically, it is an ongoing process and a non-static product. In the process, actors speak intensely about ‘change’; about their perception of change and their own role in this process. Every person brings his own assumptions to the table; these may differ considerably and therefore, understanding and challenging those assumptions (WHY?) is central to the process.

In contrast to what normally happens, the actors do not start with the project work immediately. They first look at their own organization (norms, values, ‘ways of believing’) and at each actor individually (knowledge, assumptions, people’s personal ToC). Then, the social, political, economic and ecologic context will be assessed, followed by an exploration of strategic opportunities. These are *not necessarily* the best practices, but more the *best fits*. When all this is done, strategies are decided on, and one will find it actually much easier to fill in the logframe, if that is required.

Once the project has started, constant reevaluation and monitoring is necessary, and also more easily done, since a ToC framework facilitates the choice of indicators and offers space for adaptive managing and planning. Not surprisingly, the main question from the audience concerned the difference between ToC and a logframe done correctly and thoroughly. Both Marjan (in her keynote speech) and Simone (in a workshop) were clear about this: a Theory of Change process – when done correctly! – is characterized by a central focus on belief systems and assumptions; because of the constant questioning (WHY?); and because of its involvement with all layers and aspects of the program. A ToC combines logical thought with critical reflection.

An important message for the audience concerned the warning that ToC is no magic bullet. For it to work, certain conditions need to be in place. It requires openness and self-criticism: of individuals on their own thinking and of an organization and its management on its functioning, strategies and programs. An analogy with psychotherapy was made by one of the participants. An awareness of ‘internal suffering’ and an intrinsic motivation to change needs to be there, to engage with this process of digging deep into one’s assumptions and blind spots. It can be painful and requires an open attitude and self-reflection. Good guidance (facilitation) is an absolute necessity. Just like on Freud’s couch?