# What Is This Thing Called 'Theory of Change'?

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Within the philantrophy, not-for-profit and government sectors there are thousands of social programmes being implemented by hundreds of organisations world-wide. All of these entities are convinced that they are doing good work that makes a difference in people's lives.
How can these organisations make the grand claim that their intervention or programme *actually* leads to lasting changes?

Well, this confidence is mainly due to their Theory of Change (ToC). As the name suggests, a ToC is the thinking behind how a particular intervention will bring about results.
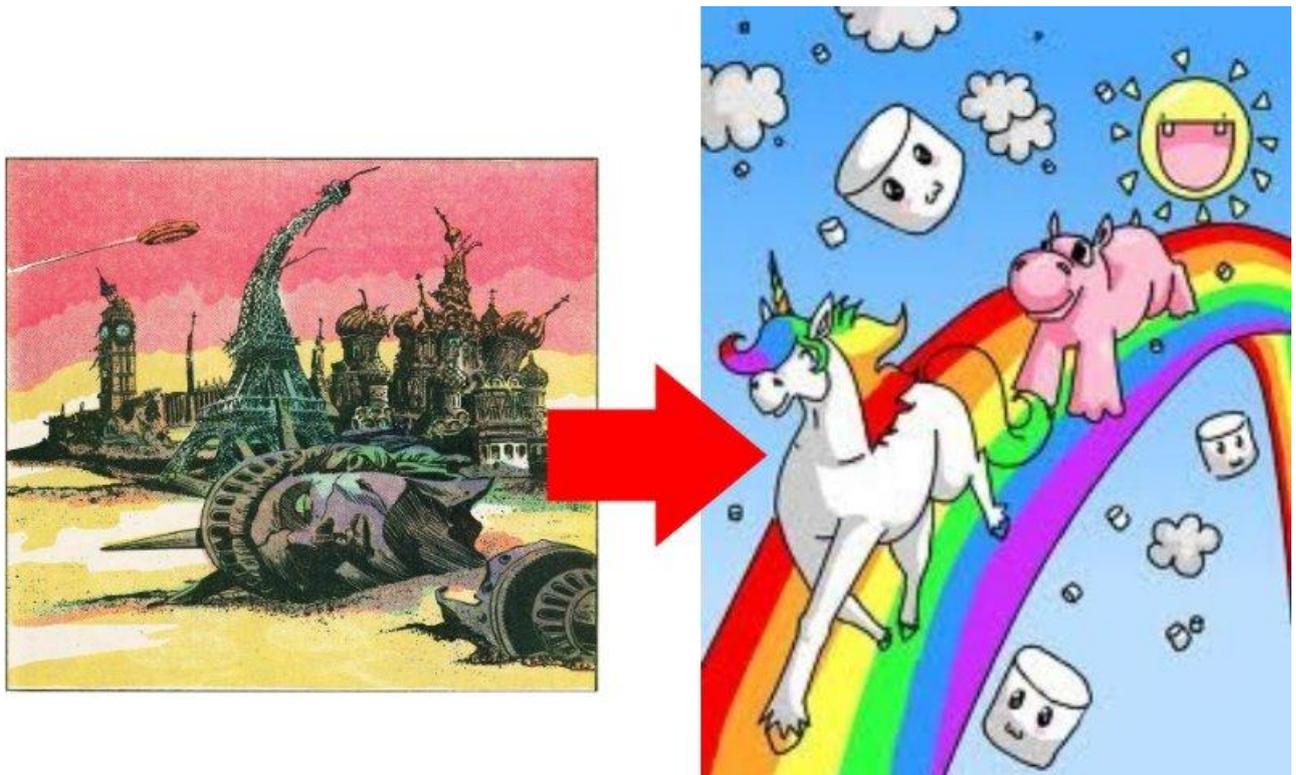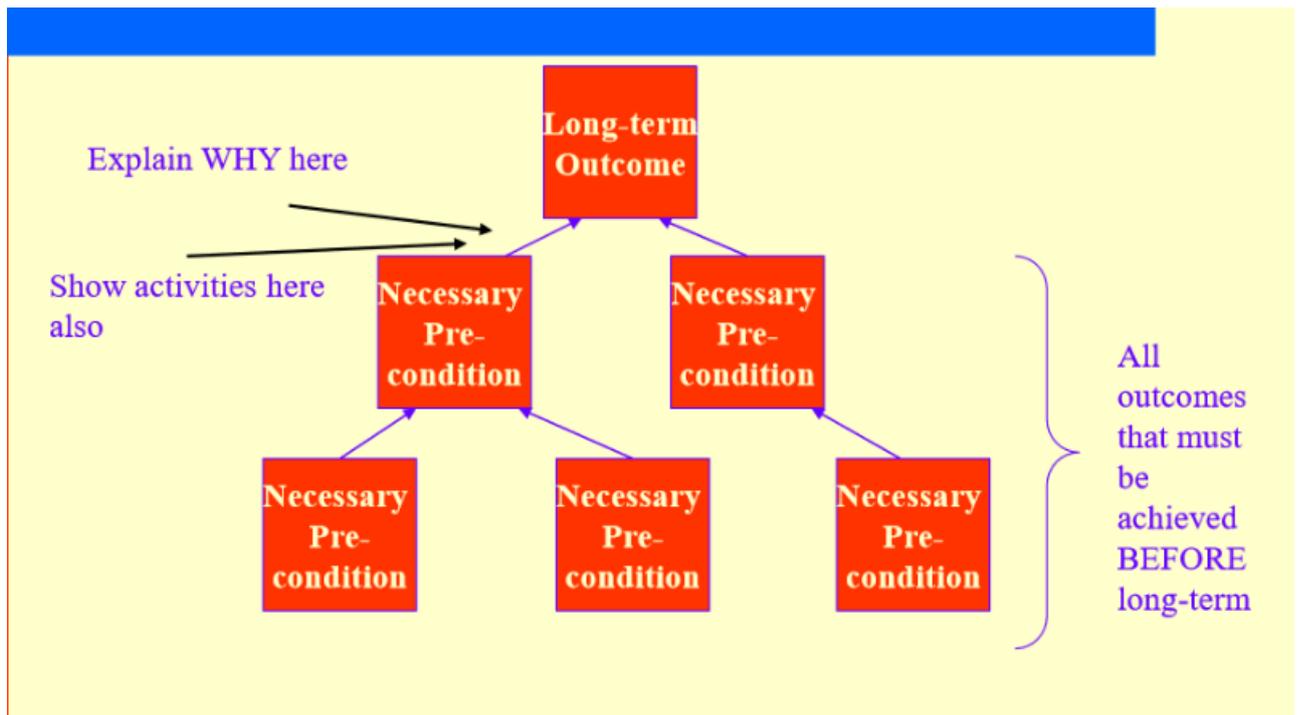

'The Theory of Change - charting how an intervention/programme takes the world from a place of desolation to utopia (or as close to it as possible)'

In this article I will give an introduction to the concept of ToC and refer to additional resources for persons wishing to immerse themselves in the subject.

The process for developing a ToC usually starts with asking the question '*What is our long term goal or outcome*?' For example, the long term goal could be to protect a nation's children. Once this goal has been identified, the next consideration is: "*What conditions must be in place for us to reach the goal*? For example, in order to protect the nation's children, children have to know their rights and the government has to also recognise these rights and put policies in place.
These necessary conditions (educating children on their rights **and** lobby and advocacy with policy-makers) would then be shown as outcomes on the Theory of Change pathway, underneath the long-term outcome (protecting the nation's children).

Diagram showing the design of a ToC (reproduced from Clarke and Anderson, 2004).

Explain WHY here

Show activities here also

Long-term Outcome

Necessary Pre-condition **Necessary Pre-condition**

Necessary Pre-condition **Necessary Pre-condition** **Necessary Pre-condition**

All outcomes that must be achieved BEFORE long-term

From the above table you will see that **the preconditions (otherwise known as 'outcomes')** leads to the achievement of the long-term outcome/goal. Early outcomes must be in place for intermediate outcomes to be achieved; intermediate outcomes must be in place for the next set of outcomes to be achieved; and so on.

To use our example from earlier, sensitization and lobbying (early outcomes) have to take place before childrens' awareness levels are increased (intermediate outcomes), who in turn demand that their voice be heard (another intermediate outcome) and policy-makers have to be pressured (intermediate outcome) before they take action (intermediate outcome). All these outcomes feed into achieving the final outcome/goal of protecting the nation's children.

As such, not only does the ToC show the outcomes/preconditions, it also outlines the *causal linkages in an intervention* between the shorter-term, intermediate, and longer-term outcomes. The identified changes are mapped –as the **"outcomes pathway"** – showing each outcome in logical relationship to all the others, as well as chronological flow.

Ideally, every outcome/precondition should have at least one *indicator* to measure success or evidence. The Toc also has *assumptions* (which are beliefs about conditions that you think already exist and are not problematic to the validity of the ToC) and *rationales (*which explains why outcomes are needed, and why in given contexts, interventions done in certain ways are most likely to bring about the change)

Additionally, many ToC outcome pathways include an '*accountability ceiling*'. This is often represented by a dashed line drawn across the pathway that separates outcomes the organisation will monitor and claim credit for attaining, from the higher-order outcomes that are beyond its power to achieve. For example, 'a world where all children are safe and protected' is outside the direct control of the programme. This higher order outcome would be placed above the dashed line. Some organisations instead of a dashed line, depict the level of control on the ToC by using different spheres; '*sphere of control*', '*sphere of influence*' and '*sphere of interest*'.
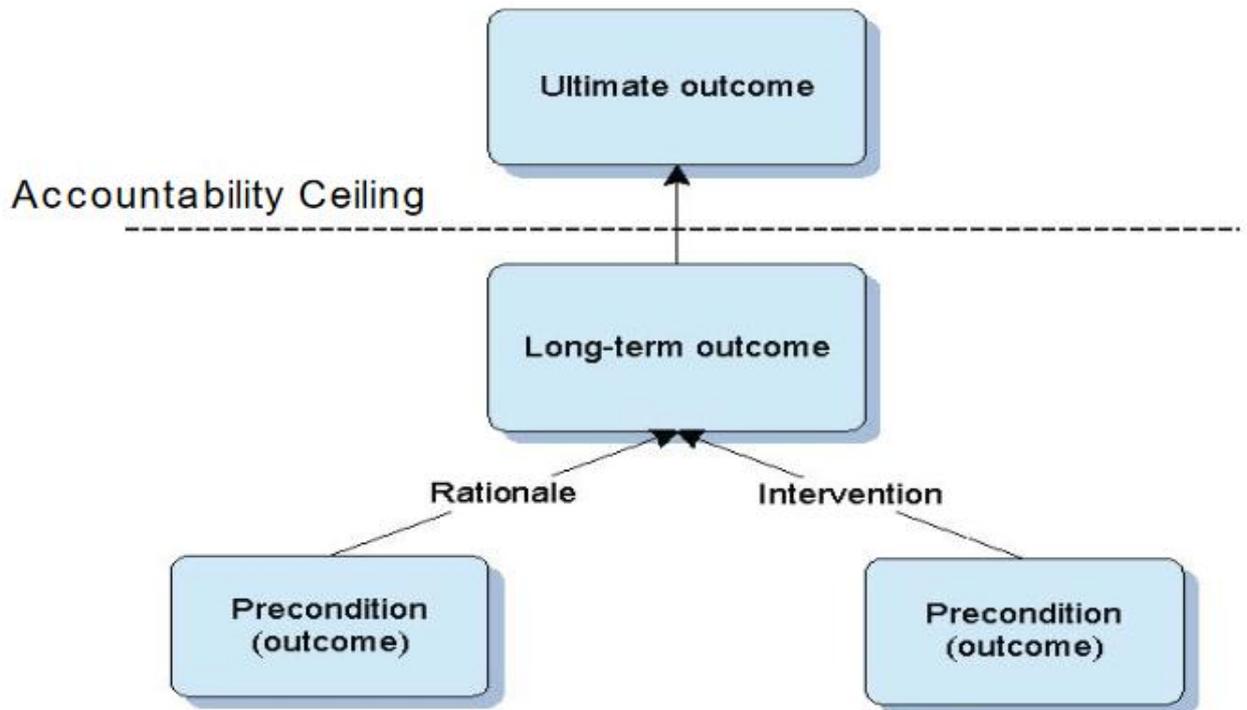
The ToC diagram is flexible and does not have a particular format – it could include cyclical processes, feedback loops, one box could lead to multiple other boxes, different shapes could be used etc.

See examples of actual Theories of Change below (legible versions of the charts may be found here).
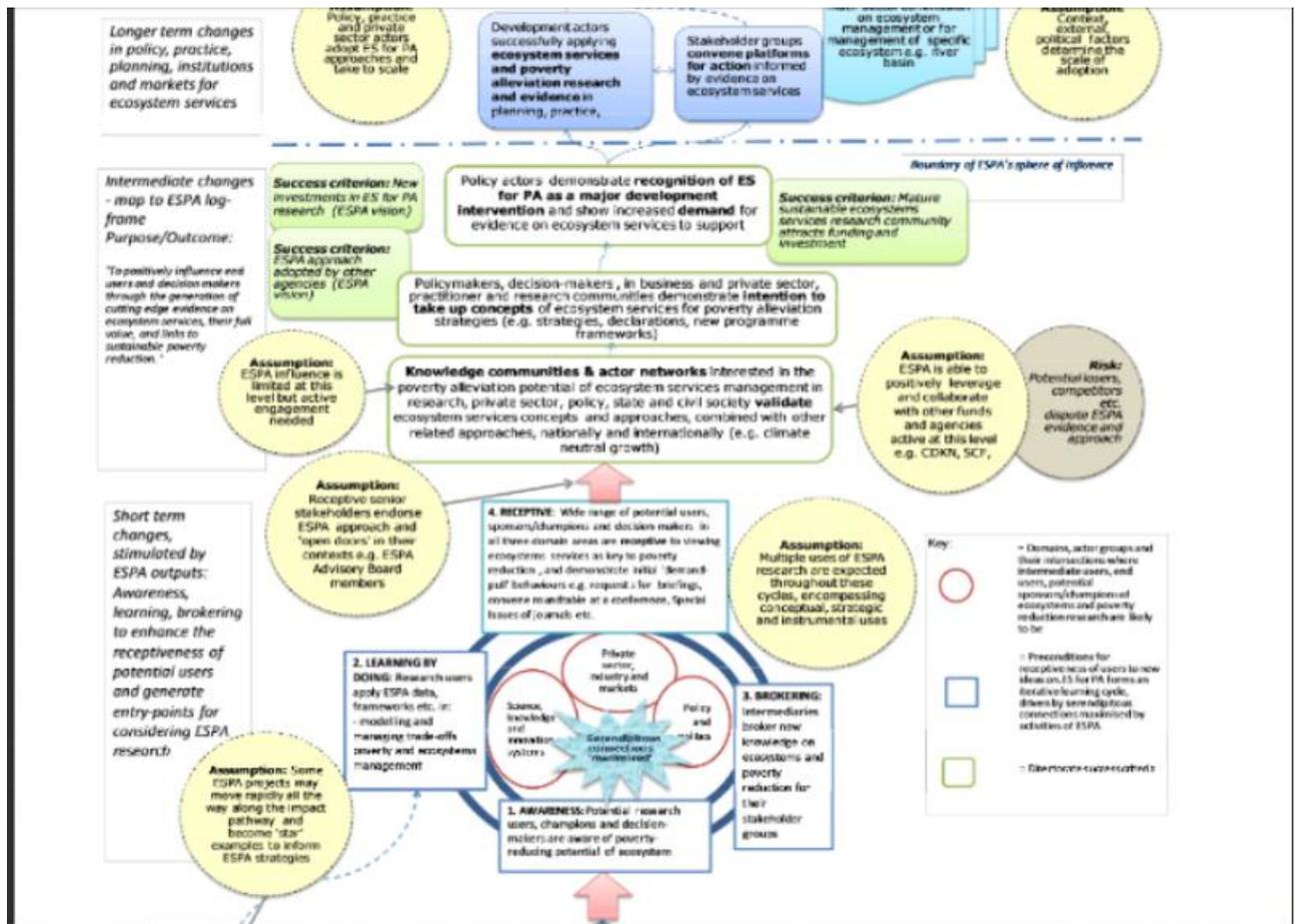
The above diagram is the Theory of Change for Ecosystems Services and Poverty Alleviation Research Programme http://www.espa.ac.uk/ - According to the Theory of Change, ESPA's research will improve the lives of poor people in developing countries by filling knowledge gaps that currently limit the way that ecosystem services contribute to the alleviation of poverty.
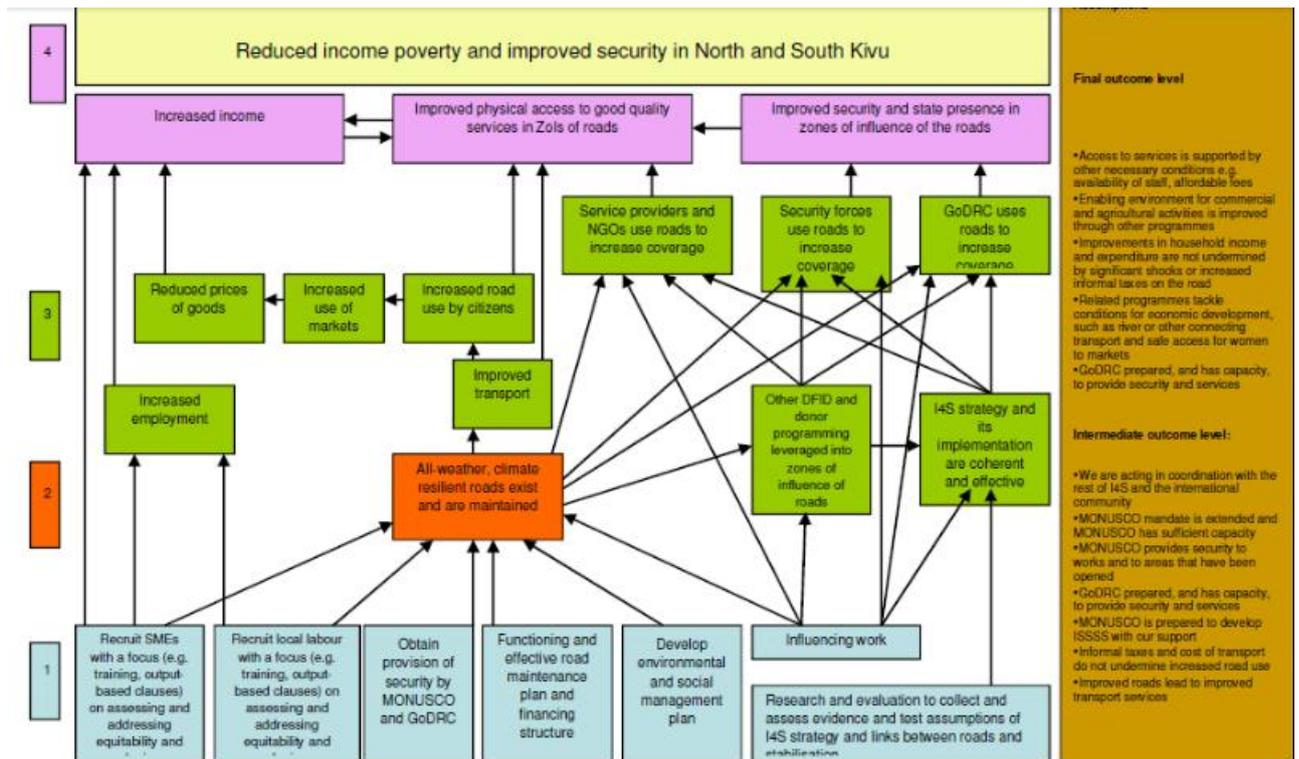
DFID Programme Theory of Change: Roads in East DRC is shown above. The theory of change is based on the fundamental logic that a road can provide access to markets as well as allow for the provision of security, which in turn can lead to improved incomes and security for the population of North and South Kivu.
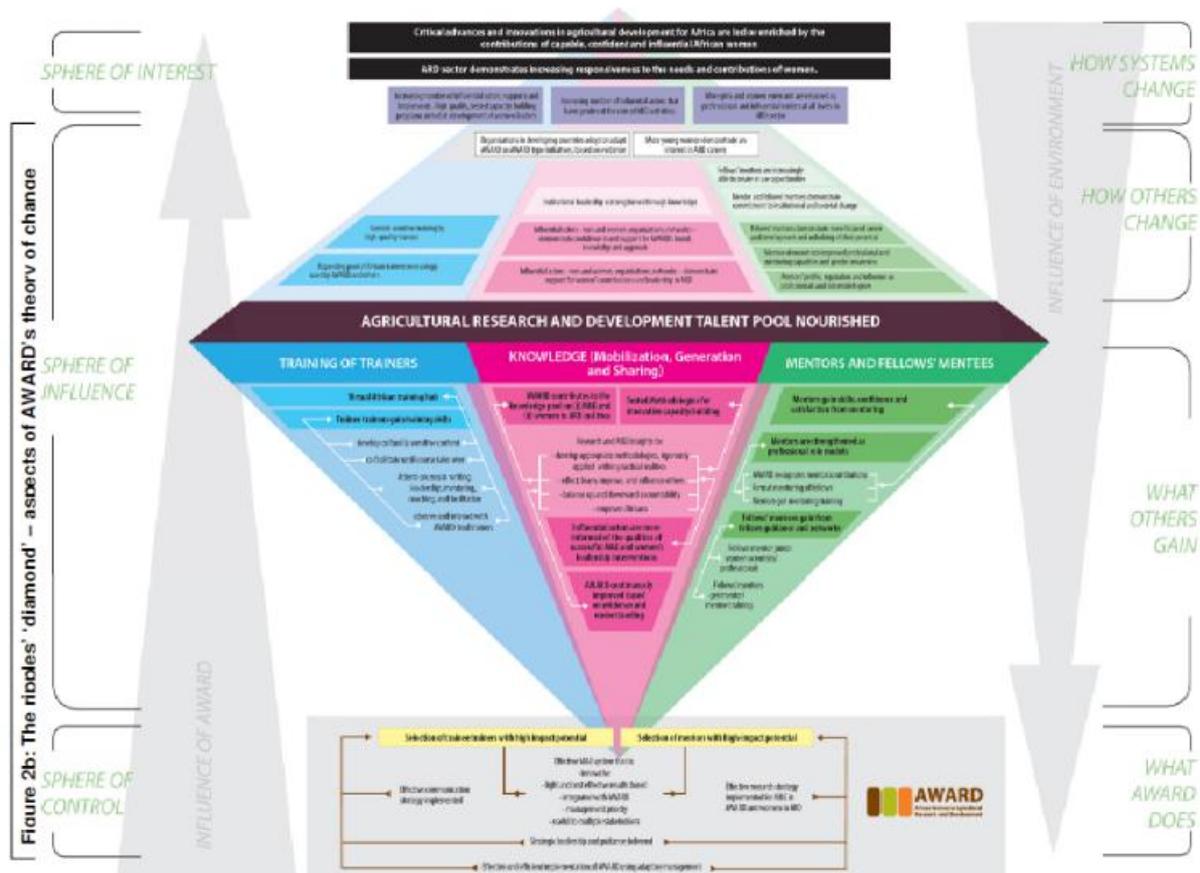
Theory of Change for The African Women in Agricultural Research and Development - AWARD http://awardfellowships.org/. AWARD is a professional development program that strengthens the research and leadership skills of African women in agricultural science, empowering them to contribute more effectively to poverty alleviation and food security in sub-Saharan Africa.

LOGIC MODEL YOUNG ENTERPRISE'S COMPANY PROGRAMME

INPUTS

- Young Enterprise's network of volunteers engages and supports young people on their journey as they discover the world of business.
- Young people are given access to relevant business centred materials explaining the enterprise cycle as well as the varied roles and responsibilities.
- Induction events are held with newly registered companies and team members, with training and advice on where to find and download supporting documents.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Young people take part in the **Company Programme** business led learning activities, composed of five stages:

1. **Getting started**
2. **Business planning**
3. **Running the business**
4. **Competition participation**
5. **Company closure**

OUTPUTS

- Sustained and continuous learning activities addressing employability barriers helps in defining career choices, role preferences and understanding expectations and obstacles present in the world of work and enterprise.
- Volunteers and centre leads engaging with the enterprise education learning model.

MEDIUM-TERM CHANGES

ACTION

Acquired learning leads to improved or enhanced:

- Behaviour
- Attitudes
- Applying knowledge
- Emotional capabilities
- Social & community-led action
- Decision making & critical thinking

Power within:
Young people act upon employability competencies gained and learning to increase their chances of engaging with work and making a smooth transition between the education system and world of work.

Power to:
Nurturing of young people's entrepreneurial spirits accompanied by an increase in centre leads' awareness of the benefits of enterprise education. This goes beyond the concept of self-employment and extends into young people's skills and capabilities necessary to succeed in work and in life.

SHORT-TERM CHANGES

LEARNING

Enhancing awareness on:

- Attitudes
- Skills
- Aspirations
- Motivations
- Opinions
- Strengths & weaknesses

- Individual development in key employability competencies.
- Personal capacities development - self awareness with respect to career preferences - sector and/or role type. Confidence in controlling their future through thoughtful education, training and/or work related choices.
- Improved learning and understanding of employers' expectations with respect to attitude and aptitude to work.
- Centre leads appreciate the potential of enterprise education in complementing the education curriculum.

LONG-TERM CHANGES

CONDITIONS

Actions taken lead to enhanced professional and emotional capabilities and increase the capacity of participants to make decisions that will impact their socio-economic condition.

Effect on individual conditions:

- Social
- Economic
- Educational
- Career
- Employment

Power within:

- Young people's employability and career potential is increased, leading to a greater array of career & personal choices.
- Young people know about business & finance, and how these form the foundation of the economic system.
- Young people are able to relate their choices to the socio-economic context and general well-being.

Power to:

- Young people improve their capacity to make informed decisions using their practical learning and experience. Decisions affect their career choices, job security, self-esteem and enterprise & economic security.

Young Enterprise Northern Ireland is a charity developing the entrepreneurial skills and aspirations of young people aged four to 25 to prepare them for the new economy. http://www.yeni.co.uk/impact/

More examples of actual Theories of Change may be viewed from a DFID publication found here. My personal favourite for a simple, clear and beautifully illustrated ToC with the narrative is from the "Green Livelihoods Alliance'.

Theories of Change are useful for understanding and assessing impact in *complex programmes* and hard to measure areas such as *governance*, *capacity strengthening* and *institutional development*.

The steps to create a ToC are:

1. Identify a long term goal.

2. Conduct 'backward mapping' to identify the preconditions necessary to achieve that goal.

3. Identify the interventions that the initiative will perform to create these preconditions (outcomes). In other words, this is completing the Outcomes Framework.

4. Develop indicators for each precondition (outcome) that will be used to assess the performance of the interventions.

5. Write a narrative that can be used to summarise the various moving parts in the ToC

General Features of a Theory of Change

👍 Gives the big picture, including issues related to the environment or context that you can't control.

👍 Shows all the different pathways that might lead to change, even if those pathways are not related to your program.

👍 Describes *how* and *why* you think change happens.

👍 Could be used to complete the sentence "if we do X then Y will change *because…*".

👍 Is presented as a diagram with narrative text.

👍 The diagram is flexible and doesn't have a particular format – it could include cyclical processes, feedback loops, one box could lead to multiple other boxes, different shapes could be used, etc.

👍 Describes why you think one box will lead to another box (e.g. if you think increased knowledge will lead to behaviour change, is that an assumption or do you have evidence to show it is the case?).

The contents of the above table is reproduced from Piroska Bisits Bullen's article.

To recap, a ToC will have the following components:

Components of a ToC

1. Outcomes, modelled in causal pathways
2. Interventions (activities), leading to the relevant Outcome(s)
3. Assumptions
4. Rationales
5. Indicators
6. Narrative

For more detailed information on the history, the evolution of the Theory of Change and resources (including free access to 'Theory of Change On-line'- this assists you in developing and storing the components of your theory), please see http://www.theoryofchange.org/

If you found my article useful, please remember to **'Like', share** on social media and/or **hit the 'Follow' button** to never miss an article. You may also be interested in my articles on the Differences between the Logical Framework and the Theory of Change and 5 Practical Steps to Develop Your Own Theory of Change.

About The Author:
Ann-Murray Brown is a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) expert who provides consultancy services (such as developing Theories of Change) for various organisations. Learn more about her and her work at www.annmurraybrown.com
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