

# Theory of Change

## A hand-out to help you walk the path<sup>1</sup>

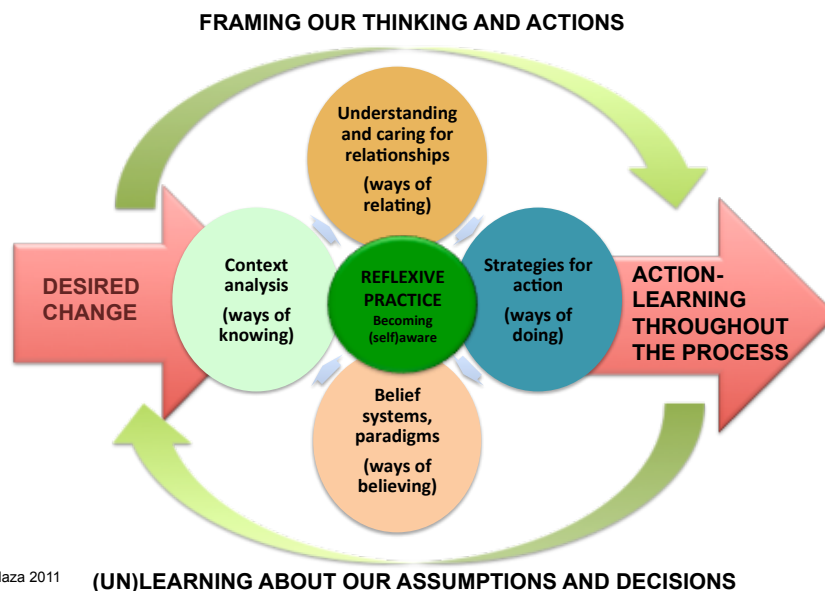
### What is a Theory of Change?

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A few definitions:

1. Theory of change is an *on-going 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. (Cathy James)
2. A *semi-structured change map* linking our actions to certain process outcomes we want to contribute to happen in our immediate eco-system. It makes explicit and articulates our underlying assumptions in relation to how we believe change happens and our contribution to that change (Iñigo Retolaza).
3. Every programme is packed with beliefs, assumptions and hypotheses about how change happens – about the way humans work, or organisations, or political systems, or ecosystems. Theory of change is about *articulating these many underlying assumptions* about how change will happen in a programme. (Patricia Rogers)
4. A thinking and action approach to navigate in the complexity of social change processes. (Iñigo Retolaza)

It is a non-linear process-oriented causal model that links eco-system analysis, relationships, belief systems and strategic thinking-action in relation to a particular socio-organizational issue that needs to be changed. It promotes explicitly *reflective practice* by uncovering and articulating the underlying assumptions supporting the thinking-action shaping a particular intervention. The uncovering of these assumptions may provoke a shift in the way a particular (multi-stakeholder) group or organization thinks and/or acts in relation to other actors and the social change process they are involved in.

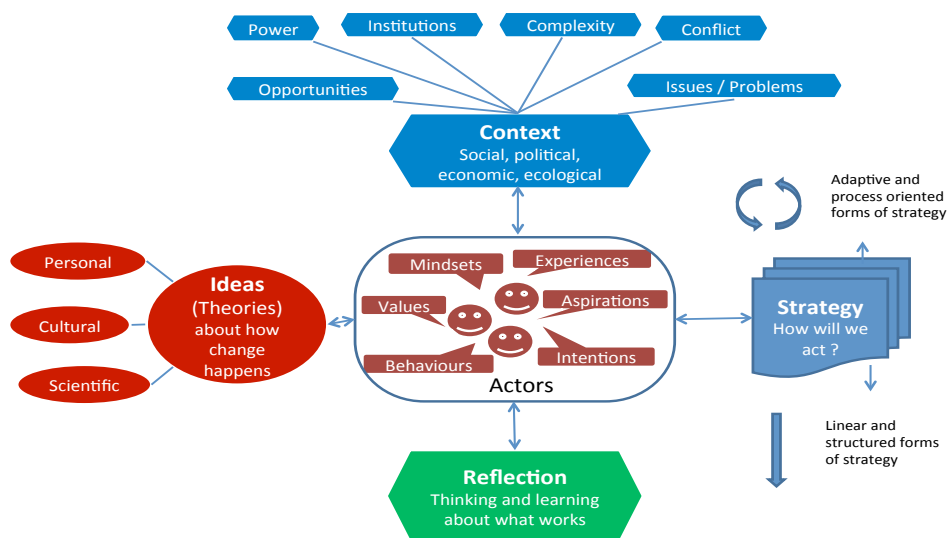


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<sup>1</sup> This hand-out is a learning tool designed for the *Theory of Change and Impact Assessment* training course run by IMA-International (<http://www.imainternational.com>). It has been produced by Iñigo Retolaza, IMA trainer (iretolazae@gmail.com)

Theory of Change approach puts people in the centre and considers all phenomena affecting how people think and interact. This approach puts the effort in making explicit all these underlying dynamics and assumptions. Therefore it is an awareness raising approach uncovering unconscious and/or (self)deceptive thinking and action affecting positive or negatively social change. This has major implications in relation to how we think (our ideas), are shaped (context) and act (strategies).

## We focused on how change is planned, let's now focus on how change happens



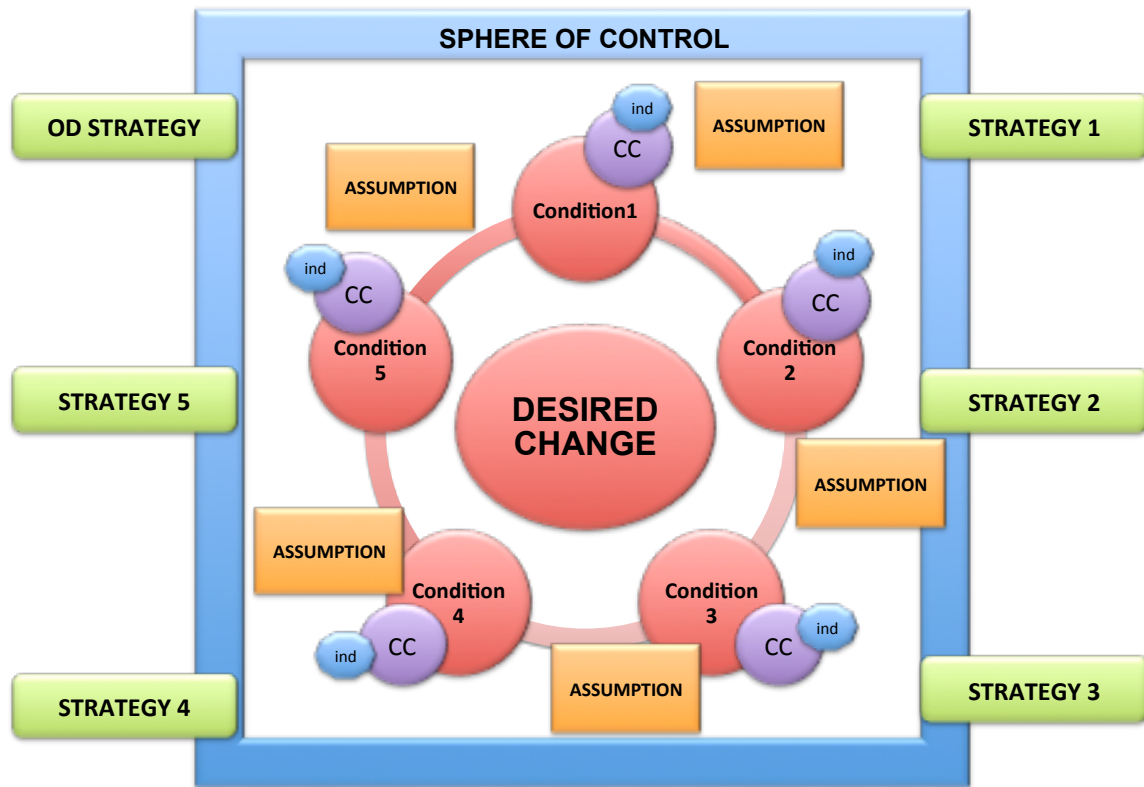
Gujit 2011

### A semi-structured change map. Basic steps for developing a Theory of Change

The basic steps are:

1. Desired Change and Eco-System Analysis
2. Conditions for Change
3. Contribution to Condition
4. Stakeholder Engagement
5. Indicators of Change
6. Strategies (operational and relational)
7. Assumption Management

These steps are walked in a non-linear way, reiteratively, as we move forward during the process/program/project. This means going through an iterative and interactive process; which demands revisiting the steps now and then with other key stakeholders as we move forward in their definition. Therefore we will develop a series of versions (version 1.0, version 2.0, etc.) until the design or implementation process is over. This way of designing and strategizing implies a flexible mindset and a non-linear process oriented thinking and action. It combines linear-rational thinking with non linear-embodied learning.



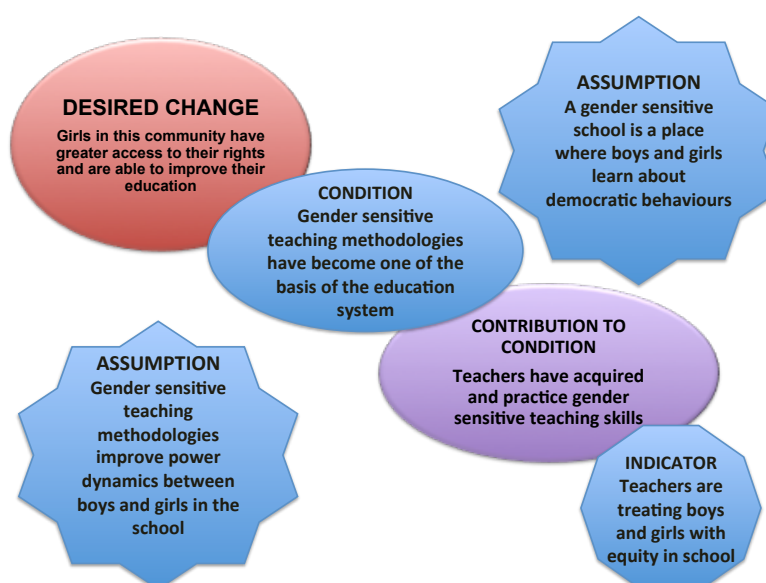
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The questions shaping each of these steps are:

STEP	QUESTIONS
<b>Desired Change and eco-system analysis</b>	<p>What is the purpose of the change we want to contribute to?</p> <p>What are the political, social, historical and economic conditions that affect or are affected by the change process?</p> <p>Which societal structures (formal and non-formal institutions and their standards, legal frameworks, cultural practices, etc.) must we consider in our analysis, and how do they affect the process?</p> <p>What are the issues we want to help to change?</p> <p>Who are the stakeholders involved in the change process and how do they relate to each other?</p> <p>What time span are we visualizing?</p> <p>What is the story we can tell about the change we want to promote?</p>
<b>Conditions for Change</b>	<p>What needs to be in place for the desired change to take place? (legal framework, relationships, platforms-relational spaces, funding, information, institutions, etc.)</p> <p>How these conditions are related to each other?</p> <p>What are the obstacles for these conditions not to be in place?</p> <p>What are the opportunities the context offers for these conditions to occur?</p>
<b>Contribution to Condition</b>	<p>What can we do to increase the probability for these conditions to take place?</p> <p>What capacities we have and which ones we need to develop for an effective performance?</p>

<b>Stakeholder engagement</b>	<p>Who are the key stakeholders that affect or are affected by the change process?          What are the interests and positions of these stakeholders in relation to the process?          What types of relationships are there between the stakeholders involved and what relationship patterns exist?          What changes need to take place in these relationships to be able to generate synergies and shared interests in our change process?          What blocking alliances and synergies exist between the stakeholders?          What sort of alliances should we promote between movers and floaters?          What sort of strategies should we implement to divide the blockers?          What strategies should we implement to bring the floaters and blockers closer to our position?          What are the assumptions underlying our analysis of the stakeholders, their relationships and strategic alliances?</p>
<b>Indicators of Change</b>	<p>Who decides what we need to observe in order to know if we have achieved the desired change?          What signs of change can we observe in the environment that allows us to determine whether the conditions identified at the outset are actually taking place?          How are we going to collect the <b>evidence</b> indicating the change?          On what assumptions are we basing our analysis of the indicators?          What have we not done/seen that we should have done/seen?          What un-expected and/or negative outcomes have taken place as a consequence of our actions?</p>
<b>Strategies (operational and relational)</b>	<p>What strategies do we need to implement for performing effectively? (Adaptive as well as structured strategies)          What strategies do we need to implement for improving relationships between stakeholders?</p>
<b>Assumption Management</b>	<p>What initial assumptions is our Desired Change based on? What are the assumptions underlying each of the methodological stages in our Theory of Change?          What are we not seeing that we need to see?          What mechanisms do we have for explaining and reviewing our assumptions?          With whom have we shared and argued about these assumptions?          Which assumptions should we reconsider?          How do we react when someone questions our assumptions?</p>

An example:



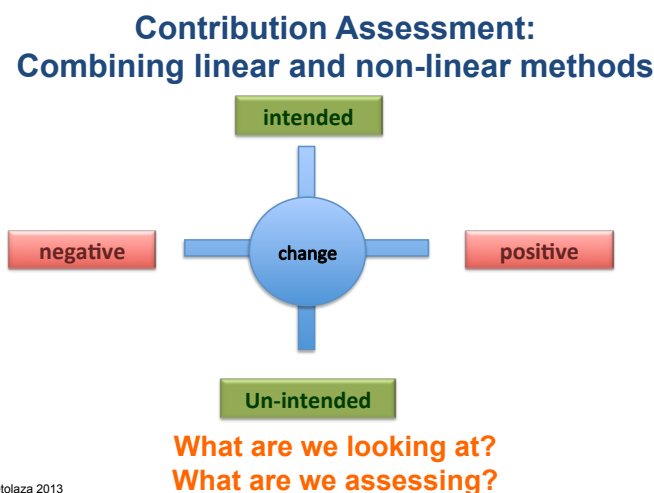
## Contribution Assessment. The missing link

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In real life, most of the development organisations focus their monitoring practices in assessing/measuring issues around output and activities while the project is alive. On the other hand, evaluative practices focus more on assessing/measuring the final impact of the intervention and other issues related to effectiveness, value for money, and so on. But, what happens in-between as regards to the outcomes we set up to direct and assess our contribution to the desired change?

We need to integrate contribution assessment practices in our M&E system. These activities can be undertaken *before* (prospective and appreciative visualizations of contribution to desired change), *during* (adjusting our ToC while the intervention is taking place), and/or *after* our intervention (learning-oriented for further improvement of incoming interventions).

Contribution Assessment is focused in knowing more about the outcomes and consequences derived from our intervention. We want to assess and learn about how our intervention will affect, is affecting, and did affect people's life. This means looking not only at positive and expected changes as outlined in our initial Theory of Change, but also at negative and un-expected changes resulting from the emergent and on-going unfolding of reality. These may be a consequence of our interventions but also because other actors' interventions. We need to look at the whole picture and adjust our M&E systems to integrate these other perspectives/phenomena as we go along. Complexity thinking-action oriented participatory M&E systems are more effective and realistic in terms of providing us all (not only project managers, but also other key stakeholders involved) with valuable quali-quantitative information when it comes to changing and/or adjusting our Theory of Change.



Contribution Assessment responds to the following questions<sup>2</sup>:

- What has changed?
- What sort of change can we see? (positive, negative, expected, un-expected)
- For whom?
- How significant was it?
- Will it last?
- In what ways did we contribute to these changes?

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<sup>2</sup> adapted from Maureen O'Flynn presentation "Impact Assessment Training", Brighton, June 2013, IMA International