

Develop programme theory / theory of change

A programme theory explains how an intervention (a project, a programme, a policy, a strategy) is understood to contribute to a chain of results that produce the intended or actual impacts.

It can include positive impacts (which are beneficial) and negative impacts (which are detrimental). It can also show the other factors which contribute to producing impacts, such as context and other projects and programmes.

Different types of diagrams can be used to represent a programme theory. These are often referred to as logic models, as they show the overall logic of how the intervention is understood to work.

Why is it done?

Programme theory can be used to provide a conceptual framework for monitoring, for evaluation, or for an integrated monitoring and evaluation framework.

A programme theory can be a very useful way of bringing together existing evidence about a programme, and clarifying where there is agreement and disagreement about how the programme is understood to work, and where there are gaps in the evidence.

It can be used for a single evaluation, for planning cluster evaluations of different projects funded under a single program, or to bring together evidence from multiple evaluations and research.

When is it done?

A programme theory is often developed during the planning stage of a new intervention. It can also be developed during implementation and even after a programme has finished. ? When an evaluation is being planned, it is useful to review the programme theory and revise or elaborate it if necessary.

How is it developed?

A programme theory can be developed by programme staff, by an external evaluator, by programme designers, or collaboratively with the community.

How is it represented?

The diagrams used to represent a programme theory (usually referred to as logic models) can be drawn in different ways.

Sometimes they are shown as a series of boxes (inputs->processes->outputs->outcomes->impacts), sometimes they are shown in a table, sometimes they are shown as a series of results, with activities occurring alongside them rather than just at the start. These different types are shown as different options on this page (below).

Advice

Advice for choosing between options for representing programme theory

- Consider the format that will be familiar to the people who will be using the logic model. Many development organisations expect to see a logframe.

- [Results chain](#)

"Results chain or pipeline logic models represent a program theory as a linear process with inputs and activities at the front and long-term outcomes at the end.

- [Logframe](#)

Logframes are a systematic, visual approach to designing, executing and assessing projects which encourages users to consider the relationships between available resources, planned activities, and desired changes or results.

- [Realist matrix](#)

A realist matrix focuses on the causal mechanisms at work in a programme or project. It specifies what exactly in the programme creates the outcomes, and under what conditions.

Advice for good practice when developing, representing or using programme theory

- See our guide to what might be considered inadequate, adequate and good practice.

[Theory of Change: Good practice](#)

[PDF](#)

[120.32 KB](#)

Methods

Processes for developing a programme theory:

- [Articulating mental models](#)

Articulating mental models involves talking individually or in groups with key informants (including program planners, service implementors and clients) about how they understand an intervention works.

- [Backcasting](#)

Backcasting is a method that involves envisaging alternative futures.

- [Five Whys](#)

The Five Whys is an easy question asking option that examines the cause-and-effect relationships that underly problems.

- [Generic change theories](#)

Generic change theories can be applied across different sectors - for example, motivation, deterrence, capacity development.

This page provides links to some resources that outline these change theories.

- [Group model building](#)

Group model building involves building a logic model in a group, often using sticky notes.

- [Previous research and evaluation](#)

Using the findings from evaluation and research studies that were previously conducted on the same or closely related areas.

- [SWOT analysis](#)

The SWOT analysis is a strategic planning tool that encourages group or individual reflection on and assessment of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of a particular strategy and how to best implement it.

Ways of representing programme theory in a logic model:

- [Tiny tool results chain](#)

Tiny tool results chain maps both positive and negative possible impacts from an intervention.

- [Logframe](#)

Logframes are a systematic, visual approach to designing, executing and assessing projects which encourages users to consider the relationships between available resources, planned activities, and desired changes or results.

- [Outcomes hierarchy](#)

An outcomes hierarchy shows all the outcomes (from short-term to longer-term) required to bring about the ultimate goal of an intervention.

Unlike results chains, it does not show the activities linked to these outcomes.

- [Realist matrix](#)

A realist matrix focuses on the causal mechanisms at work in a programme or project. It specifies what exactly in the programme creates the outcomes, and under what conditions.

- [Results chain](#)

"Results chain or pipeline logic models represent a program theory as a linear process with inputs and activities at the front and long-term outcomes at the end.

- [Triple column](#)

A triple column/row theory of change diagram shows the causal pathway in terms of intermediate outcomes, activities that directly produce these, and the influence of other factors and programs.

Approaches

- A number of approaches include recommendations about how to develop a logic model as part of undertaking an evaluation:

- [Collaborative outcomes reporting](#)

Collaborative outcomes reporting (COR) is a participatory approach to impact evaluation based around a performance story that presents evidence of how a program has contributed to outcomes and impacts, that is then reviewed by both technical experts and

- [Outcome mapping](#)

Outcome mapping (OM) is a methodology for planning, monitoring and evaluating development initiatives in order to bring about sustainable social change.

- [Realist evaluation](#)

Realist evaluation is a form of theory-driven evaluation, but is set apart by its explicit philosophical underpinnings.

Resources

- [Learning for sustainability: Theory of change](#)

Annotated list of resources about developing and using a theory of change.

- [Purposeful program theory: Effective use of theories of change and logic models](#)

This book, by Sue Funnell and Patricia Rogers, discusses ways of developing, representing and using programme theory and theories of change in different ways to suit the particular situation.