


Resource type	Guide	Date created	2016–22	Last reviewed	2022
Resource series	Emphasizing evaluative thinking for complex systems change				
Project	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Toolkit for Grantmakers and Grantees				
	 DEFINE what is to be evaluated				

A guide to developing, refining, and using milestones

Thinking through complex, big-picture change

The Annie E. Casey Foundation calls a theory of change a “practical and essential part of a successful transformation effort” (Organizational Research Services, 2004). In its most basic sense, a theory of change (TOC)¹ is an articulation of what change an organization, program, or group wants to make and the steps involved in making this change happen. Significant variations in construction and application of TOC across organizations and sectors have given rise to dozens of distinct and well-used processes and methods. Typically, however, a TOC model is comprised of (1) the **problem** to be solved, (2) the **enabling environment** (or context) surrounding this problem including the actors involved, (3) an **overarching goal** (ultimate change or impact), (4) **pre-conditions** (intermediary outcomes) for achieving this goal, and (5) the **strategies** (activities) an organization will take to reach the desired change. Theories of change come in many shapes and sizes including narrative and visual representations (see two examples below). In theories of change, milestones are akin to intermediary-level outcomes² or the significant stages required to achieve the overall impact.

Much documentation on the use of TOC models suggests that these are most helpful to teams when (1) causal assumptions are routinely interrogated and tested, (2) measurement and evaluation features alongside stated, time-bound goals, and (3) iterative adaptation of the model occurs as causal assumptions and goals shift and new pathways to change emerge (Kail and Lumley, 2012). The application and use of TOC models, though, vary widely across organizations and philanthropic organizations leading to a range of options—and levels of satisfaction—in adopting this type of approach.

¹ While most commonly referred to as ‘theory of change’, this process goes by many other names including logic model, pathways to change, and action theories.

² Milestones go by many names in theory of change models including preconditions, intermediate outcomes, goals.

Recommended steps

Setting milestones when designing a theory of change

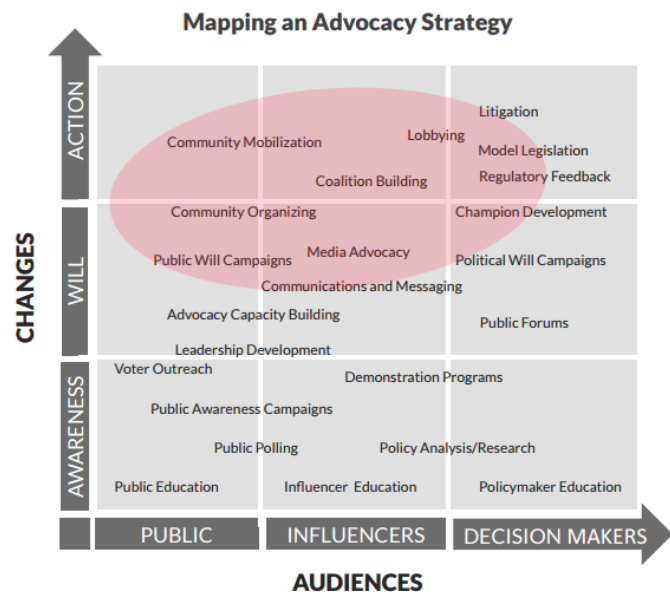
There is no single approach to setting and implementing milestones in a theory of change model. Some models are radically different from one another. The process presented below represents a vast majority of TOC frameworks, but other important and rigorous models also exist. For instance, the Center for Evaluation Innovation's Guidance on articulating a theory of change for advocacy strategies offers a unique approach to mapping the change process: plot a strategy on a grid where the x-axis represents the audiences targeted and the y-axis represents the changes desired with those audiences (Coffman and Beer, 2015).

However, most design steps agree that the process starts by identifying the problem (what are we trying to solve) and that the overall impact and enabling environment need to be thoroughly defined before attempting milestones. The milestones must be seen as directly linked to a long-term goal. Milestone development here relies on this central question: *what needs to be in place before the overall impact can happen?* The answers to this question form the milestones, or preconditions, to reaching this goal. Often, teams discover that even these milestones occur in a sequential order (one is needed before achieving another) and map them accordingly to fully articulate and visualize the pathways to change. This sequencing, however, does not necessarily imply time or linearity. Often milestones (especially in complex and political contexts) backslide, impact one other in unexpected/unanticipated ways, and play out differently than intended. The mapping is meant to help us understand and document our expectations and knowledge—both of which change over time.

After defining outcomes and their sequencing, teams should map (planned and existing) activities against their milestones to ensure congruence between the strategy and goals. Typically, after this step in TOC design, teams have to go back to revisit their goals, strategy, and outcomes to address any notable gaps between the actions planned and the changes anticipated. The best milestone development often comes from conversation, discussion, and debate among multiple experts who know and understand the context best, but their thinking can be substantially refined and tested by a facilitator whose role and responsibilities lie outside of direct program implementation.

A different model entirely

A TOC can take various shapes. It should be seen as a method, for understanding and mapping out changes. This example approach for advocacy work is very different from typical frameworks. Rather than thinking about an overall goal/impact, this method of the theory of change plots the extent to which certain strategy tactics (or advocacy activities) target different audiences and the level of change expected as a result of that activity.



Adjusting milestones while applying a theory of change

Once a TOC is developed and articulated, literature and toolkits universally agree that it must be regularly reviewed and adjusted to stay relevant. Theories of change require regular monitoring, evaluation, and reflection as programs are implemented. It is expected and encouraged to adjust elements of the TOC over time as new information is learned and realities of program implementation are discovered. Often, the long-term goal stays the same, but milestones (the pathway to achieving this change), assumptions, and activities must be adjusted as new evidence, learning, and actual outcomes are revealed.

Steps for success

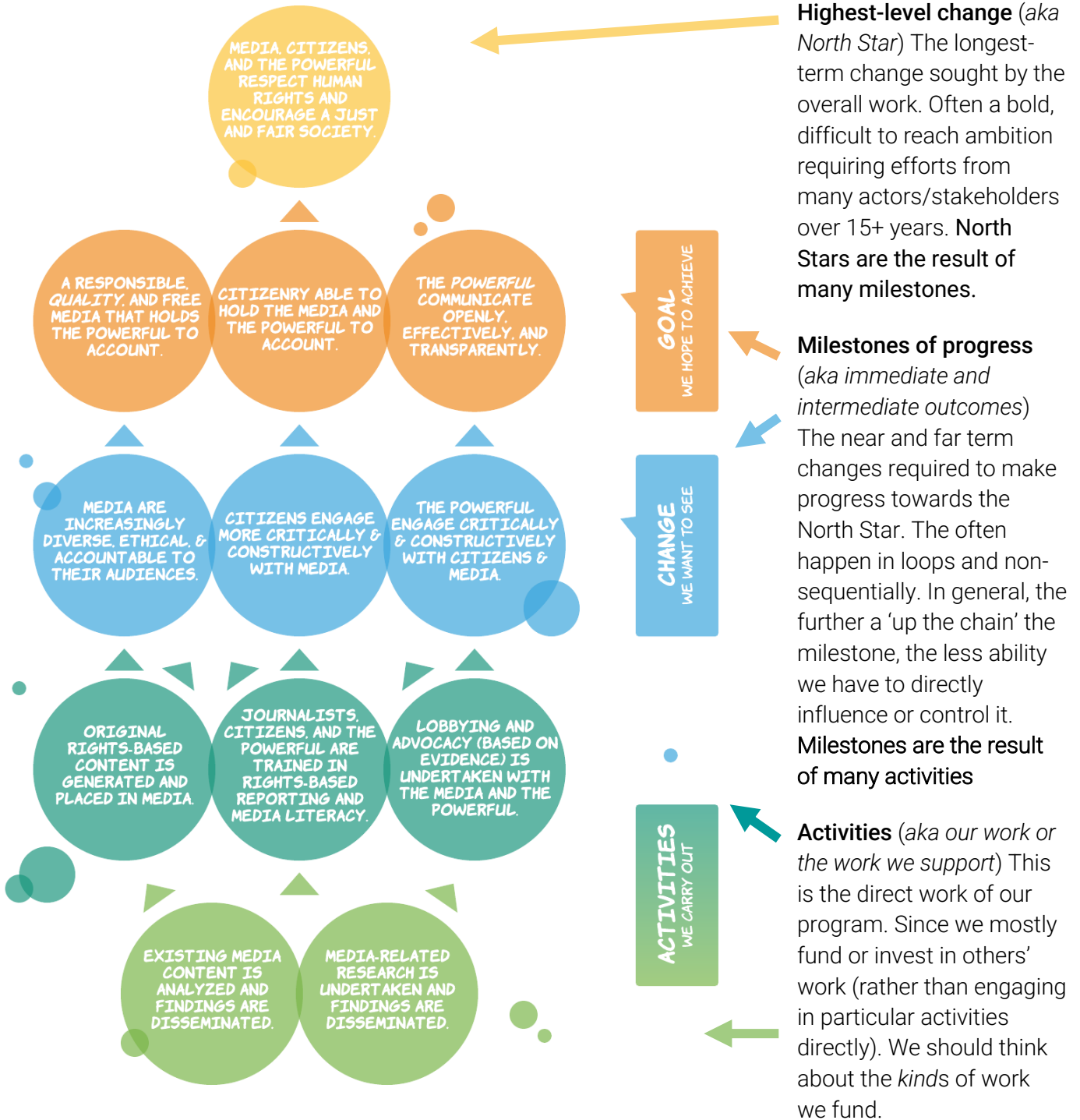
Introducing & using milestones in the theory of change

Dozens of toolkits, training packets, and guidance materials exist to help teams implement and use the theory of change frameworks. It is important to establish clear expectations up front for (1) what the goal of the process is and (2) how the tool will be used moving forward. Often a third-party facilitator is helpful in brokering a process for a team new to TOC methods, but there are important tradeoffs to consider including team dynamics (i.e. how are third parties usually received on the team) and complexity of the work (i.e. does the third party need to be an expert in your field to facilitate the conversation).

Revisiting and refining a TOC over time is essential. Teams often spend a great deal of time working on an initial concept, but many forget to bring it back into conversations about designing and planning programs on a routine basis. This renders the tool to be a point of

frustration (i.e., “We spent a lot of time on something we barely use”), rather than an essential touchstone in “transformation efforts.”

Example: Media Monitoring Africa



Example: Civicus DataShift Initiative

