



## EPRM

# Developing your project's Theory of Change

### What is a Theory of Change?

A Theory of Change (ToC) of a project describes *why* change is needed and *how* it will happen. In simple terms, this involves identifying how you would like the current situation related to an identified problem to change, and how you think you can help that change to come about through your project. Defining a Theory of Change for your project helps you to ensure that your inputs and activities lead to tangible results that add up to the desired change.

Every project is packed with beliefs, assumptions and hypotheses about how change happens – about the way humans work, or organizations, or political systems, or eco-systems. A Theory of Change is therefore also about articulating these many underlying assumptions about how change will happen in a project.

### How does a ToC help with design, planning, monitoring and evaluation?

Developing and using a ToC helps in planning and designing interventions, and in monitoring the project. A ToC forms the basis for developing the monitoring framework, as it requires you to clearly articulate how your activities are expected to lead to outputs, outcomes, and eventually impact. The changes to which you expect to contribute are formulated as the outcomes and outputs in your ToC. The more specific these are formulated (including 'who' and 'what'), the easier it will be to identify meaningful indicators to monitor these changes.

By making explicit how you expect you will achieve your aspired results, you will be able to steer and adapt your project where necessary and get a better insight on what works and doesn't work. This is particularly important in complex contexts, where risks related to disaster, climate change, socio-economic instability or conflict are high. Finally, a ToC helps in evaluation and in communication about your work and defining best practices and lessons learned.

### What does a Theory of Change look like?

A Theory of Change presents an easy-to-understand vision of how the desired results will be achieved. It is usually represented in a diagram or visualisation with an accompanying explanatory description (narrative).

- The diagram or visualisation is your 'pathway of change' and provides a clear overview of the different steps of a project, from problem to end-goal.
- The narrative describes the logic or theory underlying the project. This includes the problem statement, context, results, choice of activities, cause-effect relations and the underlying assumptions.

### What is needed to develop a Theory of Change?

A technically sound Theory of Change relies on adequate research and acquiring the knowledge and perspectives on how change happens in a specific country context. It also relies on expert opinion and perspectives about what is likely to work. A sound process implies that there are opportunities for key stakeholders to participate in the development of the Theory of Change.

## What elements does a Theory of Change consist of?

Element	Guiding question	Explanation	Example
<b>Problem statement</b>	What problem do we want to address?	The problem statement describes the problem and its root causes. Why it is a problem, and who is affected by it?	Lung cancers deaths in country X reached 33,560 or 7% of total deaths. It has been estimated that active smoking is responsible for close to 90% of lung cancer cases. 85% of adult smokers began smoking before age 18, and 15% of high school students are smokers (9% male and 6% female).
<b>Context</b>	Where do we work?	The context is the situation in which the project takes place. It describes stakeholders, local culture, power relations, other relevant projects, etc.	Efforts (laws, taxes) by the government to reduce smoking are unsuccessful. Smoking has a positive image on high schools. Parents who are smokers share cigarettes with their children.
<b>Desired end-goal (Impact)</b>	What do we want to achieve?	Impact is usually a long-term result and it may not be achievable even during the life cycle of the project.  <i>Taking the example of a human rights workshop, if the community has gotten their human rights recognized by the government, then it is an impact the project contributed to, though it is usually seen after several years.</i>	Reduction in lung cancer deaths, improved health of the population.
<b>Outcomes</b>	What change do we want?	Outcomes can be considered as mid-term results. Outcomes often take time to emerge: they are not seen immediately after the end of the activity. These changes must be reasonably linked to your activities.  <i>Taking the example of a human rights workshop, if the participants have started to mobilize their community members to seek their human rights, then it is an outcome of the project</i>	Decrease in the number of male and female student smokers. Increase in number of male and female students and parents that have a negative opinion about smoking.
<b>Outputs</b>	What do we produce or provide?	Outputs are the short-term results which are achieved immediately after implementing an activity. Outputs tell the story of what you produced or organized. They are under your direct control.  <i>Taking the example of a human rights workshop, if the participants have started to mobilize their community members to seek their human rights, then it is an outcome of the project.</i>	Student smokers receive personal coaching to quit smoking. All students benefit from awareness raising campaigns on the negative effects of smoking.
<b>Activities</b>	What do we do?	Activities are the things we do or implement. They can be expressed by a verb (e.g. "provide", "facilitate", "deliver").	Organize awareness raising campaigns in high schools. Set up quit-smoking programmes targeting smoking students.

			Identify smoking students interested in personal coaching to quit smoking.
<b>Inputs</b>	What do we use?	Inputs are the resources required for a project, programme or policy, such as funding, staffing, equipment, curriculum materials, and so on.	Trainers, coaches, flyers, funding, training materials.
<b>Assumptions</b>	What do we assume?	Assumptions are the necessary conditions for change, or the "underlying conditions or resources that need to exist for planned change to occur". They should be stated in positive language. If the assumptions hold true, the expectation is that results will be achieved.	Schools are willing to support the awareness raising campaigns. The government will support the initiative by providing funding. Personal coaching is an effective means in helping students to quit smoking.
<b>Risks</b>	What factors can undermine our success?	Risks are potential events or occurrences that could adversely affect the achievement of results.	Unsupportive school environment.

### What are the steps to take in developing a Theory of Change?

The Theory of Change model uses 'backwards mapping'. After identifying your problem, backwards mapping requires you to think in backwards steps from your desired end-goal, to the long- and short-term results that are needed to make the change happen. This mapping process helps you to define a causal pathway of change, with logical connections between the different levels of results and activities.

#### Key points: how to develop the ToC for your project?

##### Theory of Change Diagram:

In step 1-5, you will create a diagram that visualises your ToC. This visualisation can be included in the project plan section '2.1 Theory of Change Visualisation'. For an example, please see the overall ToC of the EPRM programme in Annex 1.

- Step 1.** Define the problem, including the identified root causes and stakeholders.
- Step 2.** Define the desired end-goal (impact).
- Step 3.** Define long- and short-term results (outcomes and outputs) needed to achieve the desired end-goal.
- Step 4.** Map activities that could lead to the short- and long-term results.
- Step 5.** Identify the main assumptions; how valid or uncertain are they?

##### Theory of Change Narrative:

In step 6 you will describe your visualisation in a narrative in order to capture what you have done and to relate to later on. You can include your narrative by following the guiding questions in the project plan section '2.2 Theory of Change narrative'.

- Step 6.** Write a narrative that summarizes step 1-5.

#### **Step 1. Define the problem, including the identified root causes and stakeholders**

What is the problem that you want to address? Who are you aiming to support (i.e. who is the target group)? What is the scope of the problem? What are the identified root causes (e.g. lack of knowledge on responsible practices, poor governance, no access to markets, etc.)? Who are the main

stakeholders?

### **Step 2. Define the desired end-goal (impact)**

What is the end-goal (impact) that you want to contribute to? What needs to be changed in order to solve the problem that you defined? When will your project considered to be a success? Who should benefit from the end-goal?

### **Step 3. Define outcome and output results needed to achieve the desired end-goal (impact)**

After you have defined the problem and end-goal, you can define the long-term (outcome) and short-term (output) results that you need to achieve before you can achieve your end-goal. I.e. formulate what needs to change in order to achieve your end-goal. Who and what can you influence in order to achieve change? It is also possible that results are interlinked (e.g. result X strengthens result Y).

### **Step 4. Map activities that could lead to the short- and long-term results**

Once you formulated the different short- and long-term results you need to achieve, you can start defining the activities that are needed to achieve these results. Sometimes it helps to go back- and forth between the results and the activities, until you find a logic pathway.

### **Step 5. Identify the main assumptions; how valid or uncertain are they?**

Your ToC will consist of many assumptions. There are four types of assumptions:

1. Assumptions about the causal links between outcomes at different levels.  
*E.g. educational activities on responsible mining will change the actual practices of miners and will contribute to increasing market access.*
2. World view assumptions about drivers behind a change.  
*E.g. responsible mining practices are positively affecting the situation for miners and mining communities.*
3. Assumptions about the belief systems in a society, which inform judgments about what is appropriate and feasible in a specific context.  
*E.g. women are accepted to work in and around mines.*
4. Assumptions about the context in which your project will operate  
*E.g. local government is supportive towards improving mining practices of ASM.*

First, prioritise the assumptions and only select those that are critical for the success of your project. Then, validate the assumptions as much as possible based on experiences, literature etc. If you identify assumptions that are critical for the success of your project for which you cannot find clear validation, see what actions you can take to redesign or monitor the project. Whereas it is important to identify all assumptions underlying your project, it is not necessary to visualize them all. Only the main assumptions need to be included in the visual ToC, the other assumptions can be mentioned in the narrative (step 6). During the implementation, monitoring the assumptions and checking if they are valid helps you to understand why something works or doesn't work.

### **Step 6. Write a narrative**

Summarise the visualisation in a narrative. Describe the different 'pathways' of how your input and activities will lead to your results. Describe the context in which your project will take place, including the relation with other relevant initiatives in the region. Your narrative can be described by following the guiding questions as described in the project plan section '2.2. Theory of Change narrative'.

Annex 1 – Overall Theory of Change of the EPRM

