



ORSIMPACT

Theory of Change



Theory of Change Defined

A Theory of Change is a conceptual model that articulates the linkages among strategies, outcomes, and goals that support a mission or vision for achieving social impact. It is typically presented as a visual diagram known as an outcome map and is accompanied by a narrative detailing the underlying assumptions.

Although a Theory of Change results in a concrete product, the process for developing the Theory of Change is equally as valuable as the product itself.



Applications

A Theory of Change serves as a living resource to guide strategic decisions and actions. A well-articulated Theory of Change is an effective communication tool to promote shared understanding of program, policy and advocacy, and/or systems change efforts. As the keystone for a number of critical organizational processes, it is a central building block that lays the foundation for:

- » Measurement, Learning, and Evaluation Plans (MLEs)
- » Strategic Planning
- » Evaluation Designs



Benefits

1. Strengthens the alignment of work across teams
2. Enhances clarity among teams with regard to accountability for prioritized outcomes
3. Encourages learning about progress toward outcomes
4. Increases access to a common language and a common framework among teams
5. Improves the quality of decision-making about actions, investments, and resource allocation



Outcome Frameworks

ORS Impact uses a number of different theoretical and practical frameworks to inform the development of a Theory of Change.

Two are as follows:

1. I2L2

The I2L2 Framework provides a typology for identifying outcomes that are critical to community and systems change.

Impact Outcomes

The most commonly understood type of outcome – and central focus of social impact work—refers to changes in the lives of individuals or the population in a specific community, geographic area, or ecosystem. Impact outcomes can include changes in attitudes, knowledge, behavior, skills, perceptions, beliefs, practices, relationships or conditions.

Influence Outcomes

These reflect a wide range of changes that are preconditions for other changes in resources, policies and impact to occur. Influence outcomes can relate to organizational practices, degree of alignment across groups and organizations, public will, political will, public policies, business practices, as well as other catalytic changes.

Leverage Outcomes

These refer to the commitment of resources, whether non-monetary or specific investments by public or private funders, institutions, or organizations that help to create impact or influence changes related to strategies.

Learning Outcomes

These are contributions in field-building and knowledge-advancement. They extend beyond an initiative to consider the changes made in the level of knowledge that can be used to influence new practices, implement effective practices, cross-fertilize learnings from one effort to another.

(continued)

2. Advocacy and Policy Buckets

Historically, advocacy evaluation has been measured simply by changes in policy. The Advocacy and Policy Buckets provides a framework to identify and measure interim outcomes. Interim outcomes are shorter-term, incremental changes that create the necessary conditions for changes in policy that will lead to ultimate and long-term changes in social conditions and physical lives that motivate policy change efforts.

Shift in Social Norms

Social norms are the knowledge, attitudes, values, and behaviors that comprise the normative structure of culture and society. Advocacy and policy work increasingly has focused on this area because of the importance of aligning advocacy and policy goals with core and enduring social value and behaviors.

Strengthened Organizational Capacity

Organizational capacity is another name for the skill set, staffing, and leadership, organizational structure and systems, finances, and strategic planning of nonprofits and formal coalitions that do advocacy and policy work. Development of these core capacities is critical to advocacy and policy change efforts.

Strengthened Alliances

Alliances among advocacy partners vary in levels of coordination, collaboration, and mission alignment. Alliances create structural changes in community and institutional relationships and are essential to presenting aligned messages and goals, enforcing policy changes, and protecting policy “wins.”

Strengthened Base of Support

Nonprofits draw on grassroots, leadership, and institutional support in working for policy change. The breadth, depth, and influence of support among the general public, interest groups, and influentials, for particular issues provides a major structural condition for supporting changes in policies.

Changes in Policy

Changes in the policy arena occur in stages—including policy development, policy proposals, demonstration of support, adoption, funding, and implementation. While an important focus for measuring success, improved policies are rarely achieved without changes in the preconditions to policy change identified in the other outcome categories.



Formats

A Theory of Change can be depicted using several different formats. Here are four possible examples:

Theory of Action Outcome Map

A Theory of Action focuses on the specific areas of the Theory of Change that reflect the direct efforts and investments of an organization or initiative. The Theory of Action may be directed at a particular time period, partners, and/or efforts within the broader Theory of Change.

Impact Model Outcome Map

An impact model is a high-level visual depiction of the chain of initiatives, results (milestones), outcomes, and impacts that describe an overall program or effort. It provides a crisp view of the essential elements for driving toward impact. As a Theory of Change “in a nutshell,” it is a potent communication tool.

Theory of Change Narrative

A Theory of Change does not need to be a visual representation. It can be a written explanation of how strategies lead to outcomes. As in any other format, it should include the assumptions, theoretical underpinnings, contextual conditions, and external factors that undergird a Theory of Change.

Logic Model or Log Frame

A logic model links resources/inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes at a program level.



Considerations

When engaging in the development of a Theory of Change, consider the following issues:

1. Context

Internal Group Readiness

Opportune times to engage in a TOC process include:

- » During a change in leadership, strategic visioning, or planning
- » In the midst of movement toward outcome-based evaluation or development of a Measurement, Learning, and Evaluation Plan (MLE)

External Factors

Consider contextual and environmental factors that impact the social change effort:

- » Political Conditions
- » Resource and Leverage Opportunities and Barriers
- » Traction and Momentum of Issues
- » Complexity, Dynamism, and/or Predictability of the Context
- » Relationships between Key Players and Stakeholders

2. Type of Change

The type of change you are facilitating informs the model which will best fit your Theory of Change.

- » Program changes → Logic Model
- » Policy/Advocacy changes → Outcome Map
- » Systems Change → Outcome Map

3. Stage of Development

Organizations often manage multiple strategies in an initiative. Identifying a strategy phase helps to create a measurement and learning approach that is well aligned with the operational phase of the strategy. Consider the following:

- » **Ongoing.** Currently implemented with resources, staffing, and strategic direction firmly in place.
- » **Emerging.** New areas of work for the organization. Some resources may be dedicated, but systems are still in the refinement process and the strategy hasn't necessarily been formally recognized.
- » **Aspirational.** Work that is of strategic interest for an organization but does not have identified resources in place.

4. Timeline

The horizon of commitment and the level of turbulence in which the change effort occurs can vary widely. It is important to intentionally set a timeframe, e.g. 2 years, 5 years, 10 years. This timeframe will affect the elevation, and therefore the level of detail, included in your Theory of Change.



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