



Research to
Action

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN PUTTING TOGETHER A THEORY OF CHANGE FOR RESEARCH UPTAKE

WORKING DOCUMENT

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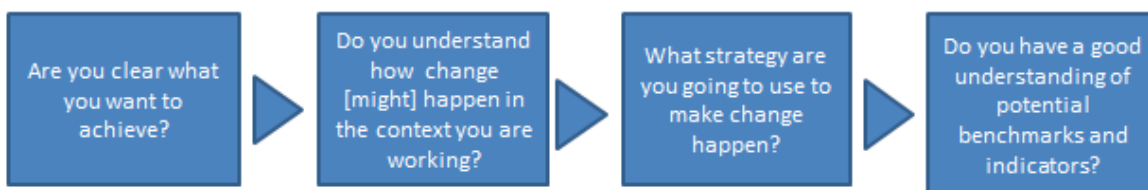
Introduction

It's amazing how the process of answering simple questions can help you uncover so much complexity. It's rather like a child lifting a large stone to reveal all kinds of creep crawly things that they never knew existed. Unfortunately, when developing a Theory of Change (ToC) we don't have the choice, like children; to leave those things alone we don't like the look of. Developing a ToC gives us the opportunity to address problems, complexity, and opportunities that exist within a programme and to think about how these issues can be monitored and evaluated.

Sometimes it's difficult to find the right questions at the right time, and this is very true of when it comes to developing a ToC. Often people are thrown into a room together and quite simply asked to get going (without little facilitation or support). The following questions are intended to help guide people in that exact scenario. The questions can be largely treated as sequential, but there are no hard and fast rules in developing a ToC (sometimes it's necessary to come from a different angle), so if you need to follow a different path these questions are interchangeable.

The majority of these questions are inspired by work that has been done within the advocacy world where pre-determined changes are sought using objective evidence. As such, this provides useful insights that can be applied to the research uptake process.

Figure 1: Initial questions for Research Uptake ToC



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1. Are you clear what you want to achieve?

This is the most important question of all because it gets to the heart of why we're doing research in the first place. It is, ironically the question that we spend a lot of time thinking about, but the least time articulating in our research strategies.

ToC are valuable for lots of reasons, but we'll focus on three in particular here. The first is because they force us to be explicit about the kinds of changes we believe (and hope!) our research will bring about. The second is that they help us to think through what kinds of communication and engagement activities we need to do in order to maximise the chances of our research bringing about change. And third, they ask us to think about (and work towards) the wider changes in other

peoples' behaviours and systems which need to happen in order for our research to catalyse change that is sustainable (sometimes called 'the enabling environment' for research uptake).

ToC brings together the process implementation elements of a programme and its outcomes. This makes us think squarely about whether the 'process' will deliver the 'outcomes' and vice versa.

Defining your vision is particularly useful from an M&E perspective, as it allows you to think more tangibly about what success will look like; what can and should be monitored; and what indicators might be relevant. Donors, like DFID, have asked grantees to develop a ToC in relation to the research uptake strategies of programmes, because in the past these have proved difficult to monitor and evaluate. A ToC ought to improve the balance between 'activity' indicators and 'outcome' indicators within your programme's M&E plan and make you think about the tangible ways you get from one to the other.

For example, if your research is looking at the cost effectiveness of teacher training programmes in Ghana, your Theory of Change should make explicit how the findings might be messaged and communicated to stakeholders as diverse as teacher training institutes (to influence their programmes and policies), Education Ministries (e.g. to influence the way budgets are spent on different kinds of teacher training); and schools themselves. Process indicators would look for evidence that the activities have taken place to engage, understand and reach target audiences. Outcome indicators would look for evidence that the desired changes had indeed taken place (e.g. teacher training budgets modified to follow research recommendations; teachers displaying new effective teaching patterns that result in improved child learning etc. However, if you are not clear on what you want to achieve, if the vision is not fully worked, then your indicators are likely to be out of sync from the very start.

Related questions:

- Is your vision plausible?
- Is the timeframe realistic?
- Will the 'process' activities deliver the specified outcomes?

2. Do you understand how change [might] happen within the context you are working?

Often there a number of change processes that need to come together in order to bring about change. This can include change processes attached to some of the following things: the policy process; the knowledge/science community; society/behaviour; political forces; and the management/organisation/capacity of the programme. It is unlikely that you will have a grasp of how change happens, without first doing your research.

No one can really tell you how change will in fact come about, but having some intelligence up your sleeve is valuable because it helps shape an approach, and the approach becomes key. This is what you will be asked to monitor and evaluate yourself against so the more you know about how this process might play out the better!

“The process will go more smoothly and produce better results if the stakeholders and facilitators have access to information that allows them to draw on the existing body of research and current literature from a range of domains and disciplines, and to think more systematically about what it will take to promote and sustain the changes they want to bring about” (Guthrie *et al*).”

The need to understand this process leads on to a series of other questions that relate to the evidence gathered and outcomes captured by other programmes as part of the change process. Context is very important here, so be careful not to assume that the change process will work in your own context, as it has done in others. There are always variables that you need to take account of, when thinking about how change and influence occur in your own context.

The alignment of actors is one area that can be better understood by looking at how this process has been planned for and then how it has actually played out within other programmes. When actors align towards a shared outcome the end result can be stronger and more sustainable, it can also help ensure change is more likely to come about in the first place. As Keystone point out, “Bringing about greater alignment in a system can itself be a crucial pre-condition for success. Relationship building is, therefore, often a strategic objective and indicator that you are indeed making progress towards your long term, sustainable outcomes.”

Related questions:

- Have you looked to see which other actors are working in the same area as your own programme, and assessed how they might influence your outcomes? Could you work together? Or are they opposed to what you are doing?
- Do you have a strategy for dealing with opposing or dissenting voices?
- What change processes are already underway in your ‘ecosystem’, and how do they influence the outcomes that your programme wants to achieve?
- Have you considered relationship building as a key element of success/indicator of change?
- Do you understand how your specific context might shape your outcomes?

3. What strategy are you going to use to make change happen?

Ok, so you have your vision, you have done your homework, it's time to think of the strategy you are going to employ to bring about the desired change. If you think you understand how change 'might' happen then there's a good chance you will have already started to think about the strategy or strategies that might be employed to bring about change.

Every element of the vision is underpinned by a set of changes that need to take place in order to move towards this end goal. Defining the changes that need to come about and the strategies for dealing with these can be challenging (like changes in confidence, skills, capabilities, relationships, attitudes and behaviour). Some elements of change are tangible changes (such as policy change), but many will be intangible process outcomes that are more difficult to see and document (i.e. changes in confidence, skills, capabilities, relationships, attitudes etc.) (Keystone, pg. 15)

Related questions:

- What needs to happen to make your vision a reality?
- Are all your outcomes necessary?
- Do you understand the pre-conditions that will ensure change is sustainable and long-term?
- What helps you accelerate your efforts?
- What gets in your way or inhibits your progress?

4. Do you have a good understanding of potential benchmarks and indicators?

Policy change goals are often long term and can take a number of years to achieve. This means that the indicators and benchmarks you set a programme are very important means of helping you understand your progress, while also ensuring that the programme can be evaluated effectively. Benchmarks should be set for key milestones within your programme using baseline data.

For policy and advocacy based programmes there are already a number of frameworks in existence that can be used to help you think about relevant indicators. These frameworks provide useful examples of activities, strategies and types of outcomes associated with the policy process. The following framework (see box below), taken from a scoping study on Monitoring and Evaluating Advocacy by Jennifer Chapman and Amboka Wameyo for ActionAid, provides a useful example of the kinds of indicators that can accompany a ToC in the area of research uptake.

Figure 2: Framework for understanding possible outcomes and impact of advocacy and campaigning work

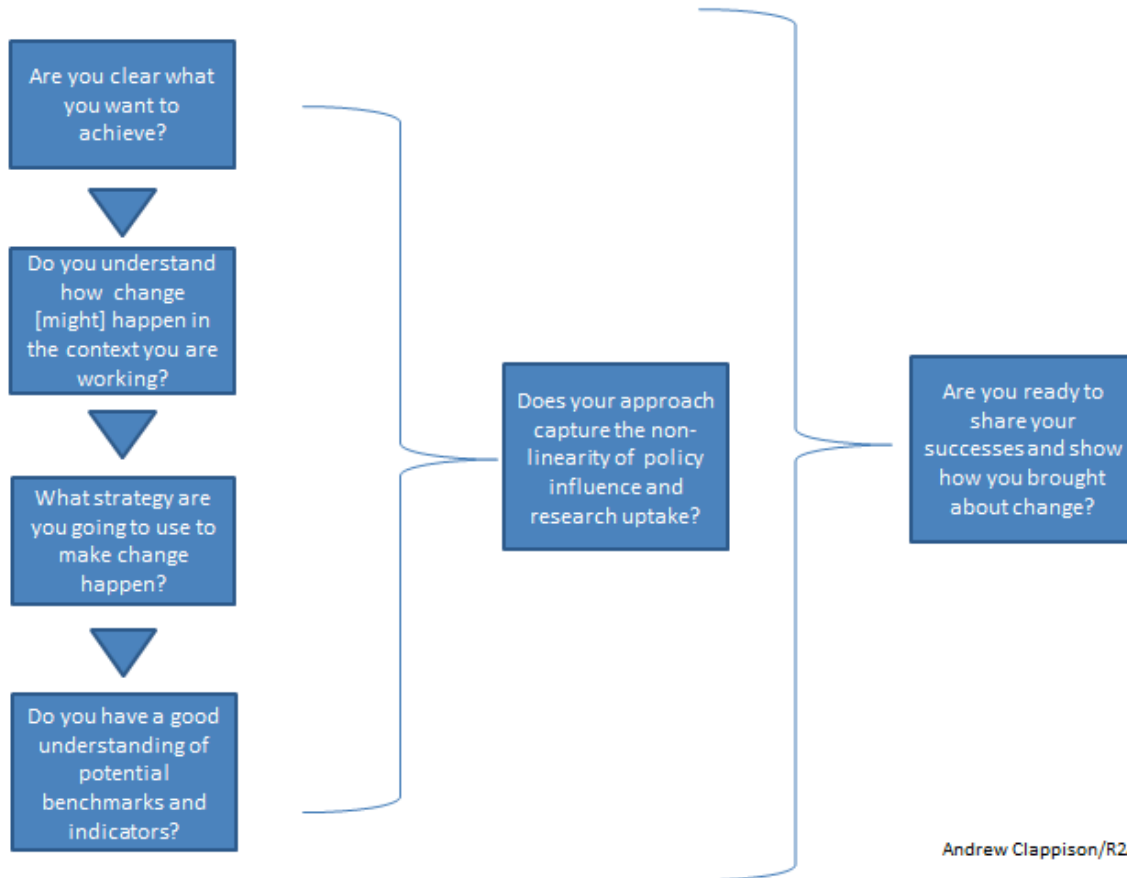
Dimension of work	Indicators of progress	Indicators of change and longer term impact
1. Policy change e.g. Legislative change Policy change Change in law	<input type="checkbox"/> Increased dialogue on an issue <input type="checkbox"/> Raised profile of issue <input type="checkbox"/> Changed opinion (whose?) <input type="checkbox"/> Changed rhetoric (in public/private) <input type="checkbox"/> Change in written publications	<input type="checkbox"/> Changed policy. <input type="checkbox"/> Change in legislation <input type="checkbox"/> Policy/legislation change implemented <input type="checkbox"/> (<i>and in the very long term</i>) positive change in people's lives as a result of the policy/legislation change
2. Strengthening Civil Society by working with... NGOs Movements/networks Community Based Organisation Popular Organisations Partner organisations	<input type="checkbox"/> Change in individual members' skills, capacity, knowledge and effectiveness? <input type="checkbox"/> Change in individual civil groups' capacity, organisational skills, effectiveness? <input type="checkbox"/> Greater synergy of aims/activities in networks/movements <input type="checkbox"/> Change in collaboration, trust or unity of civil society groups	<input type="checkbox"/> Increased effectiveness of civil society work <input type="checkbox"/> Civil groups active in influencing decision-makers in ways that will benefit poor people.
3. Enlarging democratic space or the space in which civil society groups can effectively operate in society	<input type="checkbox"/> Greater freedom of expression <input type="checkbox"/> Greater acceptance/recognition of civil groups <input type="checkbox"/> Existence of fora for civil groups to input into a wider range of decisions <input type="checkbox"/> Increased legitimacy of civil society groups	<input type="checkbox"/> Increased participation of civil society groups in influencing decisions <input type="checkbox"/> Change in accountability and transparency of public institutions
4. Supporting people centred policy making	<input type="checkbox"/> Greater awareness of individual rights and the power systems that withhold rights. <input type="checkbox"/> Change in local people's skills, capacity and knowledge to mobilise and advocate on their own behalves.	<input type="checkbox"/> Improved access to basic rights such as health, housing, water, and food.

Related questions:

- Have you included benchmark indicators that take into account your own capacity development?

The following two questions bring into focus the need to understand the non-linearity of research uptake, and the benefits of sharing your successes in this area (and the failures). These have been treated as overarching questions that relate to every step of developing a ToC (see diagram below). For many, these questions may be an afterthought, but to fully utilise this process it's vital that these questions are considered, as both have the potential to initiate powerful learning for you and others.

Figure 3: Research Uptake ToC



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5. Does your approach capture the non-linearity of policy-influence and research uptake?

Things will undoubtedly take twists and turns over the course of a programme and this means a ToC needs to try and take these things into account. If your programme is dependent on particular things coming together, you really must question what will happen if they don't. You have to be realistic and realise that all the changes you would like to see happen, may not materialise. When things don't go to plan, it's important that you can say why they didn't and adjust your programme to ensure you are still working towards your vision.

For instance, it may become apparent over the course of a programme that your target audience needs to change or to be adjusted. If you extensively mapped different audiences at the planning stage of the programme, then it might be that you can shift your attention to another group relatively easily. If not, then you have some work to do and this can create delays and confusion across a programme. It's much better to have thought about potential pitfalls and potential

adjustments such as this before the programme starts, so that changes can be made easily and without too much difficulty.

6. Are you ready to share your successes and show how you brought about change?

Your programme's success is just one part of a wider community of people working for change. These people might be working in the same area as you, a related area or a very different area. This does not matter, because you share a common goal: to make change happen through research uptake. In this vein it's vital that you use your own approach as a platform for dialogue and learning. There are four principle reasons:

1. To understand and share the lessons learned about what really works to achieve lasting change.
2. To help you report clearly on your achievements and the lessons learnt and your contribution to lasting change.
3. To help share your learning and contribute to social learning about how similar change can be achieved in other contexts.
4. To persuade your donors to invest in longer term outcomes rather than only short term projects (Keystone, pg. 6)

Acknowledgments:

Thanks to IDS for allowing me to work with them on part of the process of developing a ToC for the Transform Nutrition RPC.

Thanks to Megan Lloyd-Laney and Betty Allen for their comments and thoughts on the initial draft.

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