



# Theories of Change

Time for a radical approach to  
learning in development

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The Asia Foundation

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## Introduction

The Theory of Change approach,<sup>1</sup> with its focus on continuous critical reflection, demands a radical shift towards more and better learning in development thinking and practice. No new tool or approach can in itself address problems of institutional incentives in the sector that block such learning. However, a Theory of Change approach may be able to create a productive (albeit small) space for critical reflection – in this industry a challenging and much-needed aim.

This paper, drawing on recent research and a workshop held at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in April 2015,<sup>2</sup> outlines the growing and diverse ways in which

Theory of Change approaches are understood. It takes the key findings of recent research (Valters, 2014) a step further, by outlining and justifying four key principles when using a Theory of Change approach, tied into a deeper analysis of the development sector.

The paper highlights throughout examples of the organisational use of Theories of Change, each of which attempts to go some way towards addressing the criticisms of the approach to date (James, 2011; Stein and Valters, 2012; Valters, 2014; Vogel, 2012). It also analyses possibilities for taking these principles forward in light of the ‘results agenda’.

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1 This paper does not use the term ‘ToCs’. This is partly because it implies a singular approach, when in fact there are a number of approaches, as evidenced by the diversity of practice demonstrated at the April 2015 workshop and outlined below. Furthermore, using acronyms can be alienating for non-experts.

2 Workshop materials, including the agenda, presentations and a summary, are all available online: <http://www.odi.org/events/4194-theories-change-development>.

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# What is a Theory of Change approach and why does it matter?

Thinking within the development industry on how change happens – and how to build more effective interventions to influence change – goes on. Numerous iterations of different programme management tools, discourses and approaches have either failed to stick or been corrupted by perverse incentives and practices within the aid industry – which often encourages their reinvention or re-labelling. As the quote above implies, the industry has long been struggling with the complexity of the social processes with which it engages. Recent mainstream acknowledgements of how little development practitioners recognise their own biases and assumptions have strengthened the case for serious reflection on the state of learning in the industry as a whole (World Bank, 2015).

## What is it?

The current iteration of the Theory of Change approach emerged from both evaluation and informed social practice (Vogel, 2012), and has become a mainstream discourse, tool and approach. Outlining a Theory of Change involves at its most basic making explicit a set of assumptions in relation to a given change process. The most useful definitions help reflect the need to move beyond static ‘programme theory’<sup>3</sup> and into a more reflective and adaptive understanding of change. James (2011) suggests the following:

*‘A Theory of Change is an ongoing process of reflection to explore change and how it happens – and what that means for the part we play in a particular context, sector and/or group of people.’*

While this remains rather broad, this definition makes it clear analysis should be about both how change in a given context occurs and what ongoing role individuals and organisations can play. This definition helps tackle a recurrent problem with Theories of Change – that organisations imply that change in a society revolves around them and their programme, rather than around a range of interrelated contextual factors, of which their programme is part.

*‘If control-oriented planning and management are neither effective nor appropriate in coping with complexity and uncertainty, what alternatives do planners and administrators have for dealing with development problems more effectively?’ (Rondinelli, 1983)*

Theory of Change has become pervasive as a discourse: it has become standard development etiquette to ask, ‘What is your theory of change for that?’ in meetings and seminars. This reflects the basic definition above, simply meaning how and why a given intervention is going to work.

As a tool, for many, Theory of Change is like an extension of the assumptions column of the logframe. If developing Theories of Change is to be useful here, it will be part of a critical and evidence-based attempt to unpack the black box of causality between what (in aid jargon) are termed inputs, outputs and outcomes.

Taking a Theory of Change approach will likely include use of a tool in some form, but is broader, reflecting a desire to embed a critical and adaptive approach to development thinking and practice in organisational practice (Stein and Valters, 2012).

As Stein and Valters (2012) detail more extensively, Theories of Change fulfil a number of different purposes, including strategic planning, communication, accountability and learning. For example, an organisation may use Theories of Change as a way to communicate their goals to funders, but also to promote internal learning on programme strategy. They can also be completed at a number of different levels, including macro, sectoral, organisational and project/programme (James, 2011). While the basic idea of making explicit and critically assessing assumptions of change processes remains on each level, it is a very different task to develop an overarching organisational Theory of Change (perhaps more simply understood as a vision statement) than it is to develop implementation Theories of Change that speak closely to diverging realities at the local level.

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3 Funnel and Rogers (2011) make a distinction between a Theory of Change and a Theory of Action, stating that the former is ‘the central processes or drivers by which change comes about for individuals, groups, or communities’ and the latter ‘the ways in which programs or other interventions are constructed to activate these theories of change’. These two together form ‘programme theory’. Nevertheless, for many users in international development, Theory of Change has come to be near synonymous with programme theory, even if that link has not been made explicit.

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As a tool, one point of confusion with Theories of Change is over how they relate to logframes, with many programmes running them concurrently and often not in clear coordination with each other (ICAI, 2015). In theory, there is no reason why the two processes cannot be used at the same time. However, practically speaking, logframes often reflect a blueprint or ‘control-oriented’ project planning approach (Booth, 2015; Therkildsen, 1988), whereas many Theories of Change proponents advocate for a more process-orientated approach (James, 2011; Retolaza, 2010; Vogel, 2012).<sup>4</sup>

To overcome this issue, logframes could be based on tightly defined inputs and outputs that reflect what is initially realistically implementable. These need to have the option of being revised regularly, such as in the UK Department for International Development (DFID) State Accountability and Voice programme in Nigeria, which had at least a dozen working versions of the logframe (Booth and Chambers, 2014). Considerable upfront investment in a Theory of Change approach – putting time into reflecting on existing research and probably doing some more – would help ensure initial Theories of Change are not wildly out of step with local realities from the outset. This could help guide the completion of a simplistic (yet flexible) logframe.

Regardless of how Theories of Change are defined and for what purpose they are used, debates remain about how they should be visualised. While most accept Theories of Change should be documented in some way, a few workshop participants at our April 2015 event questioned whether producing elaborate diagrams was useful. The danger here is that the focus lies on producing a Theory of Change rather than on using it as an ongoing process (see Principle 1 below). Complicated diagrams may make sense to those involved – possibly even projecting a sense of achievement – but often fail to convey meaning to anyone who was not part of developing them. Ultimately, if teams find drafting a diagram useful to guide thinking, there is no reason not to use one. But this process is better viewed as a small part of a broader Theory of Change approach involving ongoing critical thought.

## Why does it matter?

A danger remains that Theories of Change will represent yet another development tool or approach that fails to live up to its potential. The different definitions, purposes, levels and subsequent confusions outlined above mean individuals and organisations tend to draw on elements that reflect their own priorities and worldviews, which results in many people talking at cross purposes.

Organisations also face difficulties balancing a perceived need to speak to donor narratives/reporting requirements with organisational learning (van Es and Guijt, 2015). However, perhaps most dangerously, Theories of Change are often based on weak and selective evidence bases. This can allow them to reinforce and mask the problem they aim to resolve, ‘creating a misleading sense of security about the level of critical analysis a programme has been subjected to’ (Valters, 2014: 4).

Yet, if used thoughtfully, Theory of Change can be helpful in two related ways. First, as a tool, it can give practitioners the freedom to open up the black box of assumptions about change that are too often side-lined. There is often much practitioners do not know about the contexts they work in; Theories of Change force them to make these knowledge gaps clear and revisit them over time.

Second, as an approach to development thinking and practice, it encourages ongoing critical reflection on both the specific (changing) context and how programme rationales and strategies fit into this. This aligns well with current narratives in certain academic and policy circles that development work should be adaptive and take account of complexity and political context (Wild et al., 2015). Ideas around an adaptive or process-oriented approach are not new, yet they remain pertinent specifically because of the failure of these ideas to become mainstream in current development thinking and practice (Booth, 2015; Chambers, 1974; Korten, 1980; Rondonelli, 1983; Therkildsen, 1988).

The trick here is to ensure the tool does not undermine the approach by becoming a counter-productive planning and review template. Thinking of Theory of Change as an approach seems the most exciting, building in as it does an element of the knowledge of effective practice in complex settings.<sup>5</sup> As the next section outlines, this accumulated knowledge can help shape some initial Theory of Change principles to guide its use in the coming years.

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4 While it is true Theories of Change are often predictive in nature (although they can be developed ex post), these are hypotheses about change, not fixed theories. The danger is that, by assuming logframes and Theories of Change can exist side by side, Theories of Change become equally corrupted by the demands for results.

5 Thanks to Richard Allen for the framing of this point.

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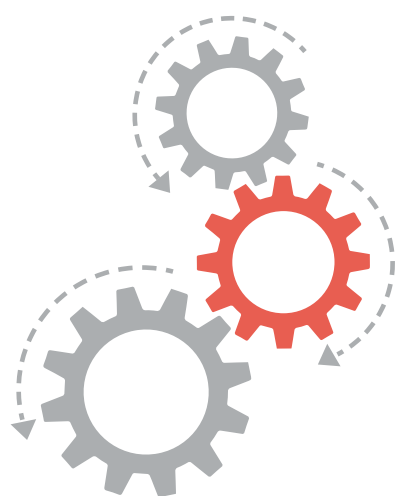
# What are some key principles of a Theory of Change approach?

More analysis is now being conducted on how development practitioners are using Theories of Change in practice (Babovic and Vukovic, 2014; CARE, 2012; Djurdjevic-Lukic, 2014; Rowland and Smith, 2014; Stein, 2013; Valters, 2013, 2014; van Es and Guijt, 2015). Based on this, as well as on the growing body of evidence on how to operationalise reflective and adaptive approaches

to development practice, a number of core principles can be provided to help guide Theory of Change approaches. Over-prescription of new approaches regularly blunts creativity and the development of critical reflection (Allana, 2014; O’Keefe et al., 2014). The following four principles aim to provide focus without stifling creativity (Funnel and Rogers, 2011; Rogers, 2008).

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## Principle 1: Focus on process



Conventional programme management tools tend to ignore ‘process elements’, treating projects as ‘closed, controllable and unchanging systems’ (Mosse, 1998: 5).<sup>6</sup> Theories of Change can help challenge this – first by drawing attention to the oft-forgotten assumptions linking project activities and outcomes but second by encouraging a broader ‘learning process’ approach that is flexible and adaptive (Korten, 1980). One common problem with Theories of Change is that they are seen primarily as a product; a formal document to be completed at the start of a project and then to sit gathering dust on a shelf. Of course, writing Theories of Change down is important, but the process of uncovering and critically appraising assumptions will need to be ongoing precisely because, in the initial analysis, many assumptions are likely to remain uncovered. Equally, as programmes unfold, more information will likely emerge to confirm or challenge assumptions in different contexts. The overall aim here is to avoid the production of static ‘evidence’ documents that fail to be integrated into programme strategies.<sup>7</sup> A Theory of Change can then be used as a way to record learning and adjusting; no documentation should be erased (as can happen with logframes).

There are strategies that can be implemented to aid with the focus on ‘process’. First, external actors can in part instigate a Theory of Change process and facilitate it over the longer term. This does not mean bringing in an external consultant to write up an organisation’s Theory of Change; rather, a skilled facilitator can work repeatedly with an organisation – for example through an action research approach – to help co-produce a longer-term strategy that works with Theory of Change thinking in the organisation. Second, the introduction of some light-touch methods can encourage regular internal engagement among programme staff. For example, programme diaries aid implementing staff to regularly write down changes in local context, problems faced, engagements with key actors and likely future pathways for the programme, among other things. This can then feed into broader thinking on overall programme strategy.

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6 Mosse (1998: 4-5) outlines three ways in which the process metaphor signals an alternative to conventional models of the development project: taking a learning process approach, highlighting relationship and contextual elements in projects, as well as referring to the ‘dynamic, unpredictable and idiosyncratic element in development programmes’

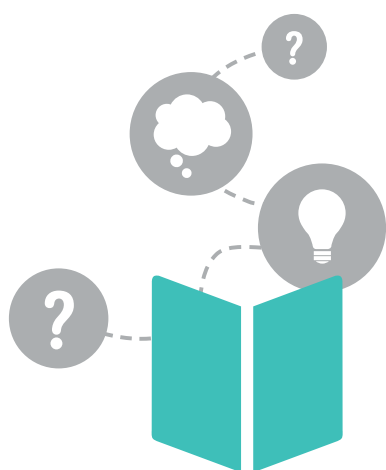
7 A political economy analysis, for example, is often completed for a project but may have limited operational relevance, in part because it gives a snapshot of the context (Hudson and Leftwich, 2014).

### Box 1: The Asia Foundation's use of Theories of Change

Under an institutional partnership with Australia's Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) between May 2012 and December 2015, The Asia Foundation has developed Theories of Change that represent its collective 'best guess' as to how change might come about. Through regular strategy-testing sessions involving multiple country offices, programme staff are asked to reflect on major events, decisions made, accomplishments and roadblocks and to feed this information into a reappraisal of their Theories of Change. Faustino and Booth (2014) suggest a range of process-oriented tools trialled in The Asia Foundation Philippines country office, including basic timeline documents, which can help aid internal learning processes as well as provide evidence of learning for donors. They also point out the importance of creating a number of time-specific Theories of Change that incentivise 'the practice and discipline of questioning everything'.

Sources: Faustino and Booth (2014).

## Principle 2: Prioritise learning



While learning and accountability are not necessarily in tension, 'official policies that profess the importance of learning are often contradicted by bureaucratic protocols and accounting systems which demand proof of results against pre-set targets' (Guijt, 2010). For a reflective and adaptive approach to become mainstream in Theory of Change approaches – and indeed in development more broadly – understandings of what accountability and learning mean need to shift substantially. In many other industries, from business to football, managers are praised for adapting to changing circumstances; in development this is currently not the case (Maclay, 2015). Having accountability for learning could be a promising route: there is no reason why, for example, programmes could not be held accountable for how much has been learnt over time, how they have adapted to new information and why this adaptation has been important for improved development outcomes.

As a tool, Theories of Change can be operationalised as what Pritchett et al. (2013) call 'structured experiential learning', which seeks to build 'learning objectives into the cycle of project design, implementation, completion, and evaluation'. In doing so, the process of articulating Theories of Change has been shown to encourage 'philosophical learning' across projects in one organisation's country office (Valters, 2014), by opening up the black box of causation between inputs and outcomes.

If Theories of Change are to support learning, it is important they do not fall into the trap of creating policy-based evidence rather than evidence-based policy. This requires a focus on searching rather than validation – moving away from looking to match theories to donor narratives and exploring change in ways embedded in local contexts (also see next section). A broader Theory of Change approach tends to demand a serious organisational commitment to shifting thinking and learning approaches, or to strategic accountability (see Box 2).

To operationalise this through a Theory of Change approach, we can usefully ask three questions:



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**1. Learning for what?** Learning purposes include being financially accountable, improving operations, readjusting strategy, strengthening capacity, understanding the context, deepening understanding (research), building and sustaining trust, lobbying and advocacy and sensitising for action (Guijt, 2010; Young et al., 2015). Inevitably, organisations will undertake Theory of Change processes with the aim of achieving a good many of these, but being transparent about what those aims are will go some way to ensuring the success of the overall initiative within an organisation.

**2. Learning for whom?** The basic layers of development programmes involving donors, programmers, implementers and beneficiaries need to be unpacked – then it can be decided where an adaptive learning approach can gain most traction and for whom. There may be greater space for reflection (or greater importance of reflection) at some levels. Front-line implementers are commonly those with the most important insights about the daily interactions of the programme, and it is important these be documented, using tools such as the programme diaries, as suggested above.

**3. What kind of learning?** If a Theory of Change approach is serious about making explicit and critically appraising ‘assumptions’, then the approach is aiming at ‘double-loop’ rather than ‘single-loop’ learning: with the latter, critical reflection operates within existing understandings of an organisation, whereas the former is concerned with questioning goals, values and organisational strategies (Argyris and Schön, 1978). Another way of thinking about this is establishing ‘rhizomatic learning’: deliberately searching for interconnected yet invisible and sometimes counter-intuitive findings, rather than seeking to validate the status quo (Aradau et al., 2014).<sup>8</sup>

### **Box 2: Learning lessons from Hivos’ approach to ‘strategic accountability’**

Van Es and Guijt (2015) put forward ‘strategic accountability’ as an anchoring concept to reflect on the potential of Theory of Change practice to foster the critical thinking essential for transformational development. The aim here is move away from accountability equated with spending and outputs and towards a closer focus on effective practice. This concept frames their analysis of Hivos, an organisation that has been a major force in driving the use of Theories of Change. After experimenting with a Theory of Change approach with partners over several phases, Hivos eventually started a learning group dedicated to institutionalising it in its own organisation. Its approach was that of a ‘benign virus’, whereby multiple parallel efforts were developed to facilitate organisational appetite, understanding and expectations around ways of working. By developing organisational principles on what a ‘good’ Theory of Change approach entailed, Theory of Change as both discourse and practice began to take root in the organisation. Examples began to emerge of how the thought process had helped staff rethink assumptions and formulate programme improvements. However, critical thinking was also constrained by Hivos’ need to respond to increasing demands from its donors, driven by political imperatives to pursue top-down accountability models, which limited flexibility.

*Sources: van Es and Guijt (2015).*

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<sup>8</sup> Ruesga (2010) fairly makes the point that it is near impossible to outline all of our assumptions about change. But this does not make the exercise futile, as it may provide opportunities to review assumptions that have direct relevance to programming decisions.

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## Principle 3: Be locally led



One of the dangers with a Theory of Change approach is that it remains a top-down process, imposed by a narrow group within organisations or programmes and/or excluding the input and views of beneficiaries. The guidance suggests a wide range of stakeholders be consulted but this often remains vague (Stein and Valters, 2012). On one level, if a small number of people develop the ‘theory’ itself, it is unlikely to represent broader organisational thinking on strategic, programmatic or intervention goals. This is particularly true if the views of implementing partners – those who are closest to the programme and with often better understanding of shifting local contexts – are excluded. On another level, there is now a well-acknowledged need to move beyond normative posturing around the need to gain the feedback of ‘beneficiaries’ on to explicit and systematic application of that feedback throughout monitoring, learning and evaluation processes (Groves, 2015). As such, the ‘beneficiaries’ of the programme need also to be consulted, at the start and throughout the Theory of Change process (see Box 3).

This is important for at least two related reasons. First, it grounds causal assumptions in local realities. Research on The Asia Foundation’s programmes in Nepal and Sri Lanka highlights how, when they exclude local views, Theories of Change may fall into the trap of describing donor narratives more than the changing context (Stein, 2013; Valters, 2013).<sup>9</sup> Second, it helps ensure a Theory of Change approach contributes to development programmes being genuinely locally led, which is commonly a key factor in success. A consultative process from the start can ensure a programme (and associated Theories of Change) is focused on locally salient issues, while ‘giving priority to local leadership and local capacity in the search for solutions to contextually identified problems’ (Booth and Unsworth, 2014: 3-4; also Peace Direct, 2012). In the absence of this, it may well be that development programmes solve ‘problems’, but not those that are the priority of local communities (Cheng, 1998). I do not suggest there is always a clear relationship between bottom-up analysis and improved programming,<sup>10</sup> but a genuinely participatory approach is a good place to start for realistic programming and associated Theories of Change.

Development tools and approaches are commonly criticised for being top-down. Does Theory of Change offer something specifically different in this regard? Perhaps not, yet. But, given that Theory of Change approaches are relatively nascent in the development industry, there remains some opportunity for embedding strong participatory principles, to ensure local actors are not alienated (again) from monitoring and evaluation processes. As one workshop participant highlighted, by engaging local partners and beneficiaries in the process, Theories of Change can be used as a stick with which to beat donors, rather than the other way around.<sup>11</sup> While it remains important not to be naïve about the transformational potential of a Theory of Change approach, it can be an asset to local actors seeking to have their voices taken seriously by the donor community (see Box 3). This requires a willingness to drop unclear terminology (and associated acronyms) and a focus on genuine debate and discussion with partners and communities.

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<sup>9</sup> In these cases, Theories of Change were developed among leading programme staff to respond to perceived donor pressures, rather than as part of a broader consultative process.

<sup>10</sup> This link itself is often imagined to be too linear, with the implicit assumption that there is ‘someone’ out there (an archetypal ‘beneficiary’ or ‘end-user’) with all the analytical insight that, if it can just be captured, will ensure programme success. There are many other factors at play here, and a Theory of Change process can contribute more if it seeks to bring out unseen issues (see also the point on ‘searching rather than validation’ in Principle 2 above).

<sup>11</sup> This inverts a point made in Valters (2014) that Theories of Change could become a corporate stick for donors to beat organisations.

### Box 3: Peace Direct's Theory of Change approach

According to Peace Direct, a good Theory of Change approach begins not with a tool, a toolkit or a guidebook but with an open discussion with a local partner about what they do and why they do it. These discussions take place before mentioning the term 'Theory of Change', given the possibility such jargon has for alienating implementing partners. The conversation will lead Peace Direct and its local partners to collaboratively evaluate their work and the assumptions behind what they do. The focus here is not a Theory of Change as a tool per se, but on the potential it has for motivating both Peace Direct and its partners to establish positive organisation cultures, such as making explicit and testing certain ideas about social change. This approach takes local peace-builders seriously and as such accepts the potential they have to help the international community better understand what causes sustainable peace and indicators for measuring it.

Sources: Peace Direct (2012), personal communication with Peace Direct staff.

### Principle 4: Think compass, not map



For some leading Theory of Change advocates, the process involves developing a 'roadmap to get you from here to there' (Center for Theory of Change, 2015). However, this way of thinking can recreate the fallacies in logframes, such as assumptions of linearity. Currently, many Theories of Change have been developed based on a moment of clear perspective in which 'context'<sup>12</sup> is understood just enough to enact a grand design for a programme (often because the Theories of Change ignore the above principles of focusing on the process, prioritising learning and being locally led). Far more useful than a 'roadmap' is the idea of a 'compass for helping us find our way through the fog of complex systems, discovering a path as we go along' (Green, 2015). This is important since Theory of Change approaches must acknowledge that 'social contexts and processes are always in flux, with emergent issues, unforeseen risks and surprises arising throughout' (McGee and Gaventa, 2010). This suggests a need for a considerable degree of modesty about development processes.

A focus on complexity<sup>13</sup> can be helpful here because it gives substance to the 'messiness' of social change. While 'social change is complex' has become development mantra and a number of useful tools and approaches have been suggested to help deal with this complexity, organisations continue to play catch-up. This is partly because taking a complexity-informed approach is really tough: it requires shifts in organisational outlook, skills, modes of working (e.g. willingness to take risks) and more. But it is also because complexity is not seen as operationally digestible, with the implicit assumption that it must be fought with more complexity. Yet acknowledging complexity does not mean ditching planning processes altogether, but rather recognising that plans often reflect best guesses about the future (and about the past too) and will likely shift over time (Hummelbrunner and Jones, 2013).

12 Much research and project documentation implies context is a fixed, singular worldview, even though it is highly contested and relative, based on judgements that shift and morph over time depending on who you talk to.

13 When 'many features of a situation are unknown, and there is not only considerable disagreement about the nature of the situation and what needs to be done, but also about what is happening and why. The relationship between an action and its consequences is unknowable beforehand, depending considerably on context' (Hummelbrunner and Jones, 2013).

14 Thanks to David Booth for this point.

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Practically speaking, what does this mean for the use of Theory of Change as tool? Some plans can take shape based on a robust upfront assessment of the available research and evidence on the context and intervention at hand. We do know more about some broad ‘outcome’ areas, for example that maternal mortality can be improved by women giving birth in health centres. The uncertainty relates to what gets women into health centres of a reasonable degree of quality in different complex contexts.<sup>14</sup> It is here at the ‘output’ level where it may often make sense to experiment and to articulate multiple theories ‘in respect of the multiple processes and relationships involved in delivering change’ (Rogers, 2008). This avoids the danger of ‘grand design’ and focuses on testing the various hypotheses on how we believe change might happen.

#### **Box 4: DFID complexity-informed Theory of Change approach in Democratic Republic of Congo**

In DRC, DFID developed a complexity-informed Theory of Change as a compass to help lead a responsive, iterative and non-linear programming approach. The business case recognised wholesale change in a complex system depended on an ‘unknowable balance of multiple feedback loops, which will generate shifting opportunities and risks over time’ (DFID, 2015a). The aim was to focus on improving the incomes of the poor via multiple possible components (business environment reform, improved access to finance, market development, reduced corruption), with the balance of activities and precise interventions open to change. While this example provides good reasons for confidence that innovative approaches can be accepted in business cases, the most recent annual review highlights difficulties in implementing the approach, in part because the pressure to deliver ‘value for money’ incentivises spend on predetermined tasks rather than flexibility.

*Sources: DFID (2015a, 2015b), Ramalingam et al. (2014), Vogel (2012).*

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# Theories of Change and the results agenda

How the drive for results is operationalised heavily constrains the space for the Theory of Change approach advocated above. However, there appears to be some room for manoeuvre, linked to growing evidence behind different approaches and internal reform efforts in donor agencies.

## The politics of results

The demand for results, evidence and ‘value for money’ is in part driven by domestic political aims. Ironically, though, in the UK at least, it was a desire to show aid was apolitical that led the New Labour government in 1997 to introduce a discourse of ‘technical, value-free “evidence”’ (Eyben and Guijt, 2015: 10). Governments of different ideological positions have since used this ‘new public managerialism’ to shield and shape aid practices in different ways. Most recently, the Conservative-led government instrumentalised it as a way to defend a substantial aid budget that co-existed with drastic austerity measures within the UK (Shutt, 2015).

Corporate terminology such as ‘value for money’ has reinforced top-down analyses and linear thinking. The top-down element is also driven by the need to show providing aid is in the donor country’s interest, which shifts the balance of accountability towards a focus on taxpayers rather than those on the receiving end of the aid. The perceived need to explain the impact of aid in simplistic terms has led to unrealistic and misleading attempts to quantify all programme results.

A recent report on DFID’s approach to delivering impact argues the results agenda has tended to prioritise short-term economy and efficiency over long-term, sustainable impact, bringing ‘greater discipline’ and ‘greater accountability for the delivery of aid’ but also a focus on quantity of quantifiable results over quality (ICAI, 2015). This focus sends the wrong signals and develops the wrong incentives for aid organisations, if the aim is to develop genuine reflection on whether programmes are improving lives. This means much of the critical and adaptive development work is being undertaken ‘despite corporate processes rather than because of them’ (Ramalingam et al., 2014). As it stands, the results agenda is dangerously unrealistic, time-consuming and misleading – and this will influence any attempts to implement new approaches (Valters, 2015).

However, the results agenda is not a completely fixed, negative and non-negotiable phenomenon. Politicians genuinely do want to know whether programmes are ‘working’, so there is an obligation on those in the industry to highlight when the results agenda is failing to deliver on its own terms. Political ideas may shift, opening up the space for different approaches. Furthermore, the push for results has had some useful knock-on effects, forcing donors and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to justify their work in more concrete ways. Monitoring and evaluation are being given increasing importance in programme cycles, particularly for organisations that previously did not emphasise learning (Whitty, 2015). In addition, innovative practitioners have sometimes used tools and approaches in critical and reflective ways (Eyben et al., 2015).

## Room for manoeuvre

A number of trends suggest practitioners have some room for manoeuvre here. There is increasing acceptance in many academic and policy circles, based on a growing evidence base, that control-oriented project planning should be rejected in favour of more experimental process-oriented and problem-solving approaches (Andrews, 2013). Cynicism abounds about such approaches in the development community. It is certainly true these approaches are largely not new (Therkildsen, 1988), but this is not the same as suggesting they are unhelpful. In fact, as Booth (2015) argues, currently the ‘intellectual case for adaptive working is better supported [and] we understand more about how to give the approach a feasible operational form’.

As the evidence base for these approaches grows, so have attempts within major donors like DFID and DFAT to try and find ways to rapidly respond to changing contexts and develop adaptive competences and incentives (Vowles, 2013). Some practical shifts towards creating a better enabling environment for this have taken place. For example, DFID’s new Smart Rules – aimed at countering fear of failure, risk aversion, ‘projectisation’ and a focus on short-term results – suggests there is some space to move in this direction (Wingfield and Vowles, 2014). Yet these Smart Rules themselves are conflicted, at times appearing to suggest logframes are no longer required while also implying they are mandatory. It is likely this

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partly reflects internal divides and debates within DFID on the best ways of understanding and tracking change.<sup>15</sup>

While internal reformers can do a great deal to widen the space for more critical and adaptive programming, many of the challenges they face are brought on by having to operate under continued political pressure for a misguided form of results. This also leads to new tools and concepts, which, while not inherently empowering or disempowering, bring with them the corporate and top-down discourse that can skew development actors' thinking and practice (Shutt, 2015).

## From results to radical learning

There is a need to move beyond excessive pessimism about the results agenda and to transform it such that genuine learning is the norm. It is unlikely it will be renamed the 'learning agenda' in the future, but if it prioritises learning it would ultimately have a better chance of delivering results. As with the principles outlined in this paper, the following ideas could be operationalised in part through a Theory of Change approach, but they also cut across development thinking and practice.

### Play the game to change the rules

The challenge in the aid industry is to exploit whatever spaces are emerging to push an agenda that takes the complexity of social change seriously. It may be necessary here to 'play the game to change the rules': to instrumentalise the demand for results to build in more transformative approaches to development thinking and practice (Eyben et al., 2015). This means reshaping or subverting misguided monitoring and evaluation practices so as to focus on what is important for programme success. This requires considerable political and organisational astuteness, and a clear understanding of the specific organisation's core values and room for manoeuvre (Guijt, 2015).

The proliferation of diverse approaches to Theories of Change is commonly viewed as a problem. Yet these differences can leave space for a more transformational interpretation of what a Theory of Change approach demands (Eyben, 2015). They can be productive so long as Theory of Change approaches retain a link to both the 'pragmatic concern with more effective development practice and the concern for broader reflective understanding, even though these may at times be incompatible orientations' (Mosse, 1998). This paper has sought to use this space to develop principles for an approach that can challenge many of the common models of thinking and practice in development, which organisations can use to play the game to change the

rules. It is important that those interested in developing such a Theory of Change approach engage their NGO or donor counterparts; it may be there is more flexibility than one imagines.

### Develop strategic accountability

Too often, accountability is confused with accountancy (Chambers, 2014). The demand for results often implies the question, 'Did we act as we said we would?' A more interesting and productive question is, 'Did we act as effectively as possible?' This encourages a focus on ideas and strategies and the underlying basis for them, which includes (but is not solely about) knowing where and how money and effort were expended (van Es and Guijt, 2015: 96). While this is clearly not without its own tensions, building this kind of more strategic accountability allows for a more principled rather than largely reactive response to the pressures for results.

Existing work on Theory of Change approaches is clear that, where development practitioners challenge their own cognitive constraints and adherence to particular ways of thinking, development organisations also need to change their institutional cultures if these attempts are to be effective or mainstream in the future. While the principles outlined here could help guide an associated Theory of Change framework, this perspective suggests it would be even better if organisations develop their own, in line with core organisational priorities. The principles here can be seen as useful starting points; they would need internal debate and critique before being taken forward.

### Get serious about learning

The aim here is not to suggest those in the development industry do not learn already, but to get more specific about which kinds of learning, for what purpose and how they can do it better. Engaging with a process learning approach can be pretty radical and effective if done seriously, involving revising budgets, changing staff and perhaps even stopping a programme. Such changes are generally perceived as highly risky for programme staff and their organisations, threatening careers, future bids for projects and reputations. Clearly, there need to be broader incentives to work in these ways beyond the introduction of any given tool – such as valuing learning and recording how it is done – incentives that too often fail to exist in development work.

Regardless, we must guard against the myopia that characterises the push for accountability also embedding itself in a learning agenda (Ebrahim, 2005). The aim is not to reify learning, but ultimately to instrumentalise it to improve how development programmes work. For example, we should not assume more and better

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<sup>15</sup> Soul-searching has gone on in donor organisations before, and it may be useful for current reformers to reflect on this (e.g. Edgren, 1999 on the capability of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)).

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information leads to improved decision-making; indeed, this is an assumption often made without sufficient evidence. Those attempting to encourage organisational learning should pay particular attention to the lessons we can draw from past attempts to encourage such processes (Carlsson and Wohlgemuth, 1999).

Existing tools and approaches are often complementary to a Theory of Change approach. Tembo (2012), for example, highlights how, through an action research process, a citizens' voice and accountability programme found a way of bringing together elements of political economy analysis and outcome mapping to inform the gradual evolution of the programme's Theories of Change.<sup>16</sup> It should be noted, however, that the choice and use of tool/approach reflect our own understandings about how change happens: our own worldviews and how we choose to shape them. If a Theory of Change approach is to be genuinely useful, it needs to force people outside their comfort zone: exploring overlaps with existing approaches should not be construed to mean carrying on with business as usual.

### **Encourage greater collaboration between researchers and practitioners**

This paper has outlined examples of some interesting Theory of Change approaches, and the workshop suggested there was demand for more detailed case

studies. Knowing how a Theory of Change process has worked for organisations in different sectors, with different sizes and capacities for critical reflection, could help us understand the different entry points. Yet how many case studies are written with recommendations that then fail to be implemented in reality? In line with the learning process approach outlined here, simple case study research approaches need to be eschewed in favour of longer-term action research, which builds in a deeper research–practitioner engagement (O'Keefe et al., 2014). This demands a high degree of willingness and transparency from interested organisations and agencies, but also greater modesty and openness to engage with the reality of programming from researchers. The collaboration between The Asia Foundation and the Justice and Security Research Programme (JSRP) represents one such model, with researchers embedded in country offices for up to three months at a time (Arnold, 2014; Radice, 2015),<sup>17</sup> and The Asia Foundation is involved in ongoing action research with ODI too. This kind of engagement is not without its tensions, but these can be productive so long as there is a genuine spirit of mutual learning. The challenge for collaborations such as these is to try and embed research more closely in the programme cycle so it can help programmes adapt and change course as necessary.

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<sup>16</sup> Many other theories, tools and analyses could overlap with Theory of Change processes. Theories include programme analysis or programme theory; organisational learning; double-loop learning; theories of action; rights-based approaches; innovation theory; complexity theory. Tools include theory-based evaluation; realist evaluation; outcome mapping; contribution analysis; problem trees; stakeholder mapping; process/problem diaries; outcome harvesting; most significant change. Forms of analysis include power; conflict; systems; structural; context; political economy; constraints; contribution.

<sup>17</sup> See <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/jsrp/research/theories-of-change-in-practice/>

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# Conclusion: modest radicalism

The development industry is unbalanced in a number of ways. Approaches to accountability are narrow, time-consuming and unrealistic, and this works to displace genuine attempts to learn and adapt. Programmes are often developed in a top-down way rather than being a result of locally led endeavours. Various, rather static, evidence artefacts are produced, but they fail to stimulate learning that can lead to improved programming. Social change processes are often understood in a linear way, when we know things rarely unfold as planned.

Many donors and practitioners recognise these imbalances and try to do something about it. But the political incentives, deep bureaucratic cultures and power dynamics in the aid industry often sustain the status quo. These are longstanding problems that so far have successfully resisted change, despite years of critique. The Theory of Change approach advocated in this paper, in its own small way, seeks to shift the centre of gravity. The agenda put forward is ‘radically reformist’: sensitive to critiques of development thinking and practice but with the conviction that much can be done to make the endeavour more effective (Gulrajani, 2011).

There is a need for modesty when considering what can be achieved; it would be naïve to believe a new tool or approach can have such transformative power. An important question, posed by van Es and Guijt (2015), is as follows: ‘Is the search for the right approach relevant at all, or are the conditions for the application of any approach for critical reflection in practice more decisive?’ Certainly, the problem at hand is not an absence of useful tools or approaches to help aid good thinking and practice. The reinvention of these is in part a reaction to the persistent tensions in the industry, akin to bandaging an infected wound: helpful in some ways but not tackling the root of the problem.

Yet the search remains relevant as part and parcel of a broader discussion on how to generate the right incentives to enable critical reflection to become the norm. We should not obsess over new tools and approaches in development thinking and thinking, given their fuzziness and faddishness – but this is not a good enough reason to ignore them entirely. Perhaps the greatest contribution of Theory of Change will lie in helping carve out a space for genuine critical reflection within aid organisations. This may not sound too radical to those outside the industry, but within it, this is an important and pressing need.



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