

PROJECT PLANNING WITH THE THEORY OF CHANGE

A practical guide

English edition - September 2022



ChangeLab
IMPATTI IN MOVIMENTO

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WORKING GROUP

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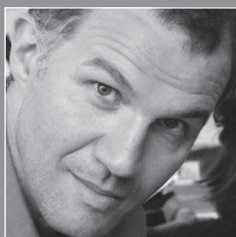
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ChangeLab

Changelab is a working group created by professionals of international cooperation (active in important organisations and consultants of this sector), motivated to identify and develop good practices for programming, design and evaluation. During the last few years ChangeLab has created a path of study, research and reflection on the methodologies and tools used in development cooperation programs, with a specific focus on the application of the *Theory of Change (ToC)* and the evaluation of impacts in terms of *outcomes*.

This collaboration has allowed the elaboration of two guides, the first on the interpretation of the new logical framework of Europeaid ("Contributions to the interpretation of the new logical framework of Europeaid" - 2016) and the second on the use of the *Theory of Change* ("*The Theory of Change for International Cooperation: an introductory guide* - 2017), both disseminated through Info-Cooperazione, the reference website of the Italian international cooperation community.

These publications were followed by a series of training sessions organised in Milan, Rome, Bologna, Trento, Bari and Florence, attended by over 200 non-governmental practitioners, donor officials, consultants and researchers.

Through these experiences, characterised by a very positive and constructive evaluation of participants, the group has further developed and perfected the theoretical-laboratory training path that this work has built on. This guide is therefore a translation of the updated and revised version of the 2017 introductory guide "*The Theory of Change for International Cooperation*".

Hence, ChangeLab wants to be a place of excellence for reflection and study to improve the overall impact of international cooperation, starting with the experimentation and consolidation of innovative methods in the field of strategic planning, design, monitoring and evaluation.

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Introduction

edited by Elias Gerovasi

The international cooperation sector is undergoing a strong change as a result of various transformative forces. The basic scenario is changing and new actors who are able to make significant contributions in terms of partnership, are summing up. Those involved in cooperation will increasingly have to, in a rigorous and transparent manner, account for their capacity to generate change and to measure the impact of their actions. This is both a fact and an opportunity for donors and practitioners. These issues are therefore highly discussed in the national and international debate. Some institutional donors are putting in place new tools to include planning and programming within broader reflections and organisational changes.

The in-depth study undertaken by the ChangeLab group on Theory of Change fits into this scenario. This methodological approach, which is becoming more and more widespread in our field, could in fact help organisations to plan, programme and evaluate their initiatives more effectively with a view to lasting and measurable change. We are very convinced of this, also after having shared and discussed the opportunities and critical aspects of the Theory of Change with all the operators in the sector, who took part in several workshops in Italy.

This guide is the result of this journey, which started from pages [the website of Info Cooperazione](#) and in little more than a year produced first guide on the theory of change applied to planning for Italian NGOS and a training course organised over two days in various Italian cities.

The debate that emerged and the interest aroused among colleagues in the organisations motivated us to return to the subject, update the contents of the first guide and develop certain aspects that we had the opportunity to focus on more clearly.

Our goal is to further explore the Theory of Change in order to understand its assumptions, opportunities and limitations in planning, programming / design and evaluation. Our hope is that this guide will at least partly answer the doubts of many colleagues and support the desire to give more value to our work

Good reading.

FOREWORD

THE THEORY OF CHANGE BETWEEN PROGRAMMING AND DESIGN

edited by Christian Elevati

“*No wind is favourable for those who do not know which port he wants to land in.*”

Seneca, 'Letters to Lucilius', letter 71

International cooperation has constantly questioned its own capacity to generate profound and lasting changes, by tackling the very causes - complex and multi-level - of poverty, injustice and inequality in the world: all this in an economic and political, cultural and technological context that has changed profoundly over the years and continues to change at an astonishing speed. Globalisation and new technologies, the new challenges of migration and sustainability, new geopolitical balances, climate change and resource scarcity have raised the bar of complexity and increasingly require specialised professionals and multidisciplinary *teams*, as well as organisations structured to learn continuously from their work and to be able to optimise their impact. On the other hand, governments, donors and civil society are increasingly asking those involved in international cooperation to be able to account for their real capacity to generate change, in a rigorous and transparent manner. The Theory of Change (ToC from here on)¹ - integrated into a system of management and evaluation of international cooperation initiatives - has shown that it can accompany professionals and organisations, donors and institutions in focusing their intervention, in constantly measuring and enhancing the real change produced, in correcting inefficiencies and waste and in enhancing the relationship with the main *stakeholders*, leaving behind self-referential logics.

But what exactly is ToC? Is it a rigid and codified model that can be applied to all situations? Is it a schematic process that we use to write projects? Is there a definition shared by stakeholders? Is it clear how and when to apply it in international cooperation? Answering these questions is not easy, but certainly the literature shows that there are a number of basic elements agreed on. To begin with, rather than equivocality in the definition of the ToC, one should probably speak of its multidimensionality and flexibility. These are characteristics that made ToC adapt to the many fields and purposes which it has been used for, often integrated with each other. However, the common elements make us underline that a ToC must include:

- a clear statement of the assumptions underlying our strategic choices: why do we expect that, in a specific context and within a specific timeframe, certain interventions will trigger real and lasting changes better than others?;
- the articulation of a pathway showing how, from change to change, through causal chains, long-term impacts are expected to be achieved; this pathway will then be realized through the development of coherent programmes and projects, specific organisational structures and competencies and the provision of the relevant human and economic resources;
- a system for managing and evaluating the changes generated, capable of testing both the assumptions underlying our strategies and the tools deployed in *itinere* and *ex post*.

Without a clear, reasoned (*evidence-based*) and detailed explanation of the reasons why we expect the desired change to occur, it would not only be impossible to assess the effectiveness of a programme or project (*in itinere* and *ex post*), but would also be impossible to design a programme or project capable of generating the desired change (*ex ante*).

¹ All technical terms used in this guide are explained in the glossary available in the appendix.

The **ToC is described in detail in a narrative report that clarifies the process that led to its definition and the conclusions reached. Generally, it is also summarised in a diagram/graphic scheme** which can take the most variable forms according to the type of organisation, the group which it is addressed (internal or external use, for communicating to donors or for programming, etc.), but also for more prosaic reasons such as the graphic designer skills. These are working documents which by definition are subject to continuous review to be integrated and improved on the basis of the information returned by the monitoring and evaluation work.

In view of that, on the basis of the definition that we as ChangeLab chose to use since it better reflects the approach we adopted, we can describe the ToC as a "rigorous yet participatory process whereby groups and stakeholders in a planning process articulate their long-term goals (impact) and identify the conditions they believe have to unfold for those goals to be met. These conditions are modeled as desired outcomes, arranged graphically in a causal framework"² In other words, the development of a ToC forces us to ask **"what long-term change do we want to achieve for the benefit of the main recipients of our efforts, and what are the best short and medium-term pre-conditions (in terms of changes/outcomes) for achieving it?"** instead of asking "what actions do we have to put in place to achieve our objectives?". Starting from activities is a typical approach of those who remain imprisoned in the very short and closed cycle of "call for proposals - project - call for proposals - project...". This is a substantial difference, which draws a clear dividing line between two completely different methodologies of intervention. And this is easily understood, for example, when projects are formulated only after having developed a ToC. **The ToC in fact** - as we will try to show in this guide - **should be developed at least at programme level** (thematic, country, etc.), intended as a portfolio of projects pertaining to the same strategic area, **if not at organisational strategy level**, which should derive from the vision and mission, declining in concrete change outcomes. The above does not apply only for organizations that implement interventions, but also for the same donors, who should have every interest in establishing clear planning in terms of strategic priorities and changes to be promoted. In summary, if we wanted to show at which levels we can develop a ToC, we would have a scheme like the following (the thematic and geographic areas reported in the scheme are purely illustrative):

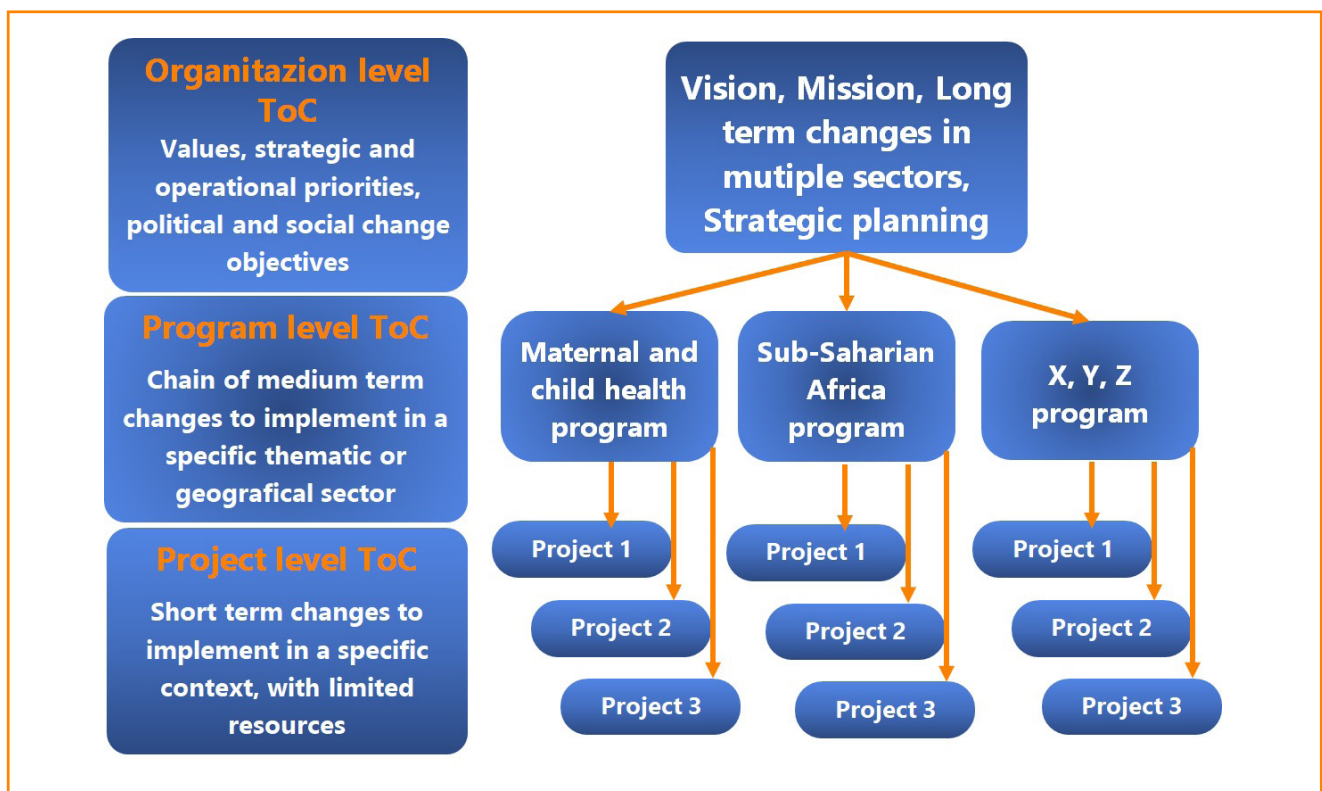


Fig. 1 - Different levels of application of the Theory of Change

2 Dana H. Taplin, Hélène Clark, "Theory of change basics", Acknowledge, New York, 2013, p.4.

In this guide we will therefore focus on the programme level, showing how the elaboration of a ToC can become particularly effective for project formulation. It should be added that from a purely logical point of view - but also approaching practical and economic feasibility - it would not make sense to formulate as many ToCs as there are individual projects to be written. However, also from the direct experience of some of the authors of this guide, it should be noted that some donors have requested to submit a ToC after receiving the Logical Framework (LF) of a specific project. Since the CSOs in question (as almost all Italian organisations...) had not yet developed their own ToC at an organisational or even programme level, they proceeded to elaborate the ToC starting from the Logical Framework, with the limitations and errors that this inevitably brought with it.

With respect to project cycle management (PCM)³, we can say that **ToC takes up and further develops the potentials within the Logical Framework Approach as a participatory planning tool and in the literature that explains the project cycle** (more focused on process quality control). Let us briefly recall the 6 phases of the project cycle:

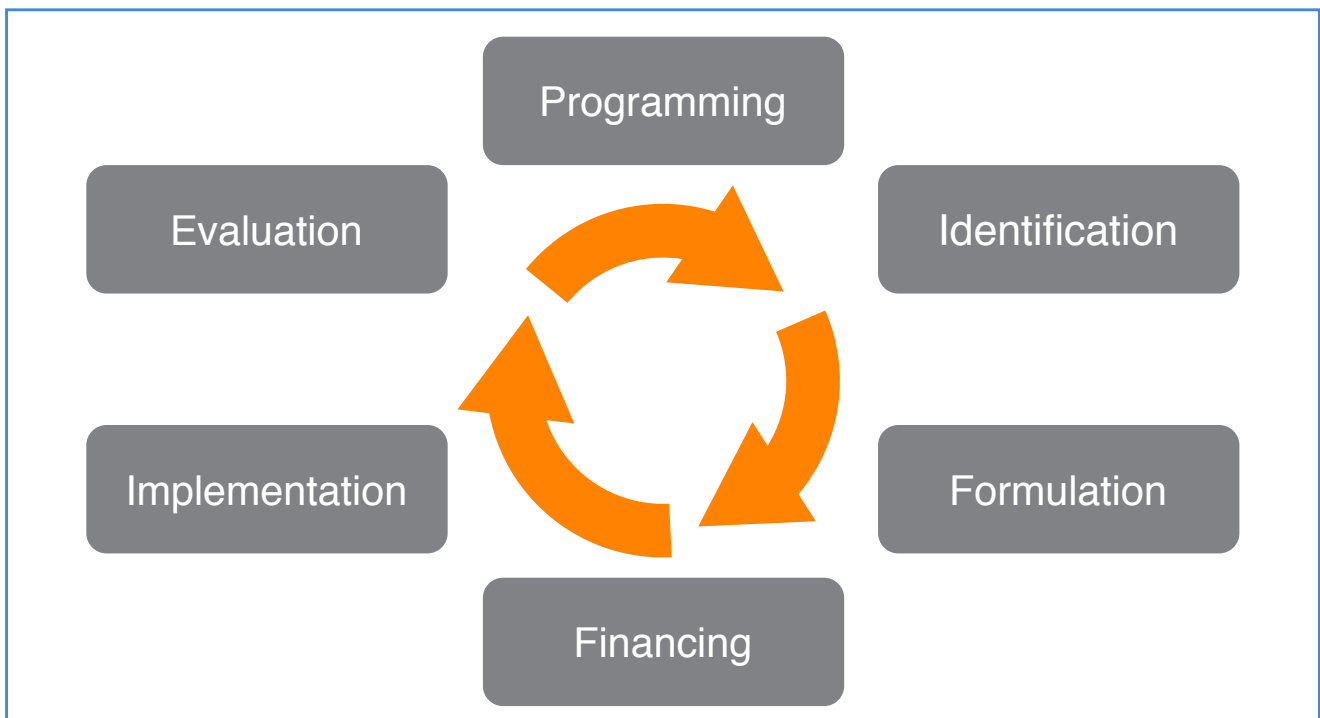


Fig. 2 –The Project Cycle

As we hope will emerge from reading this guide, ToC can be usefully developed in all phases of the project cycle because:

- It helps in the context analysis (and thus in the programming phase);
- It shows the way to achieve results: how we get there, when and why (making it easier the identification phase and then the formulation phase);
- It helps to define target groups and stakeholders;
- It creates the basis for agreements between partners (what has to happen, who does what and how to integrate inputs into all phases of the PCM);
- It is a guide in the selection of priority strategies;

³ The latest guide on pcm from the european commission dates back to 2004 and can be found here: https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/aid-delivery-methods-project-cycle-management-guidelines-vol-1_en

- It brings monitoring and evaluation activities back to their deeper meaning (especially in cases where the ToC has never been done and it is important to reconstruct it ex post), which is to:
 - help us to continuously learn from our work (including the unexpected, whether positive or negative) and to build on the experience for continuous improvement in our ability to generate change;
 - lay the foundations for the evaluation of the social impact generated.

By cross-referencing the phases of the project cycle with the three possible levels of development of a ToC outlined above (organisation, programme or project), **we can summarise the level of detail on which the analyses in this guide focus:**

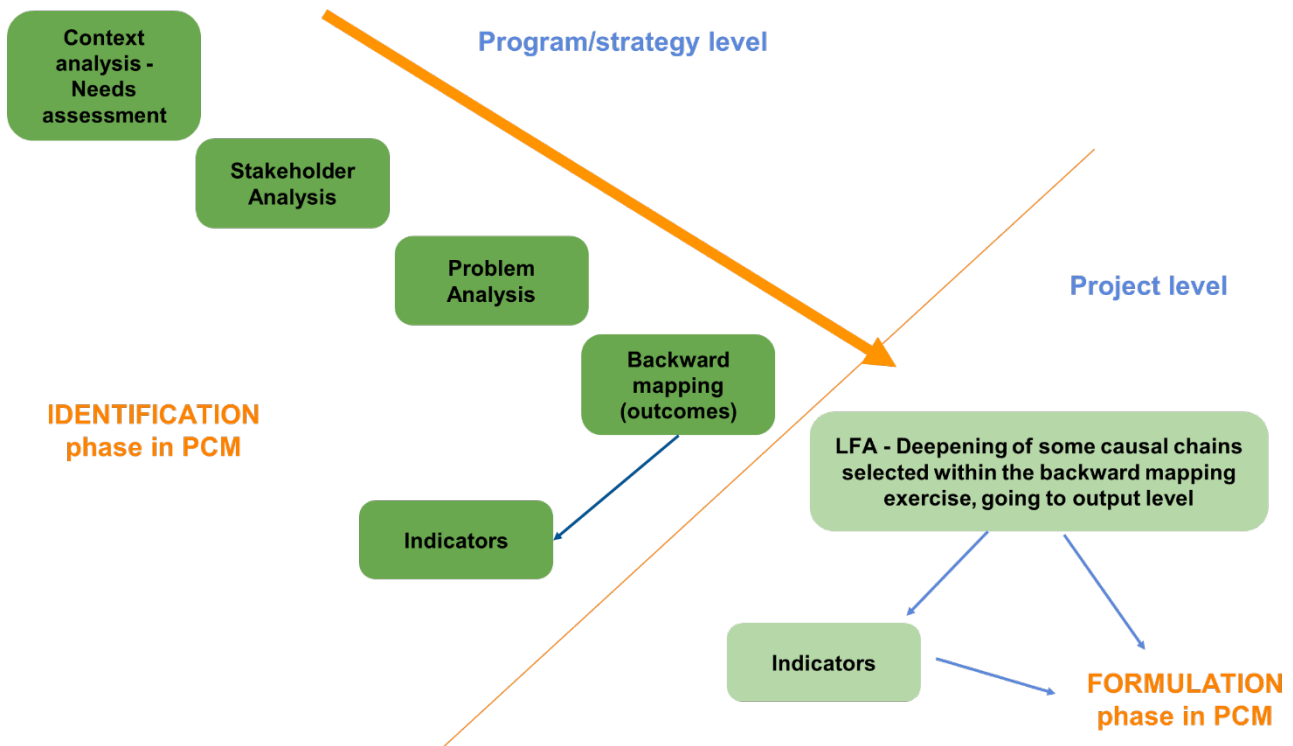


Fig. 3 - Development of a ToC from programme to project.

Indeed, the "identification" phase is when, in the project cycle, we define thematic and/or geo-political priorities, typical of the programme level which a variable number of projects coherent with such priorities will refer to. The logical framework - a tool that today is often reduced to a compilation exercise to apply in calls for proposals - recovers its original sense when we move on to the formulation phase in the project cycle, after the clarity and in-depth analysis deriving from the development of a ToC.

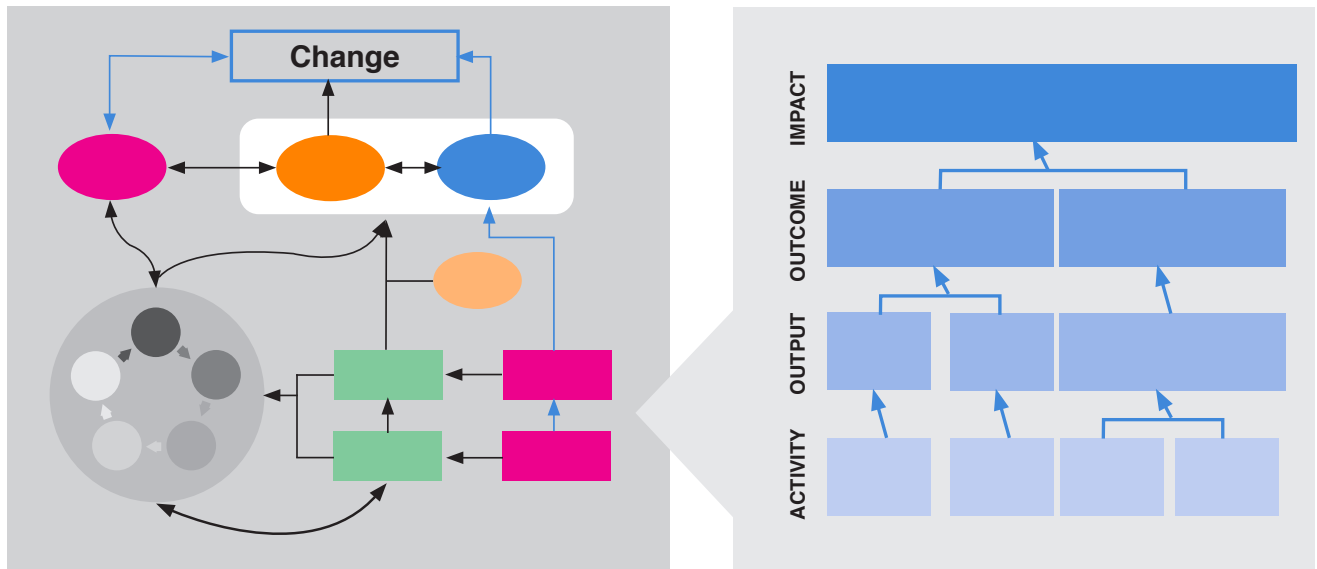


Fig. 4 - Connections between Theory of Change and Logical Framework

It is clear, however, that ToC itself may be treated as a mere bureaucratic task. The greatest responsibilities fall in equal measure on donors and on decision makers in organisations: it is mainly in their hands to transform the moment of planning with ToC into a fundamental opportunity to improve the entire sector of international cooperation and the impact it is able to generate. In **fact, the ToC makes it possible to develop strategies capable of concentrating work and resources on outcomes** (changes in behavior, processes or economic, political or social systems, etc.) **rather than on outputs/deliverables** (number of people trained, schools built, children vaccinated, community clinics opened, etc.). The latter remain essential to the process only to the extent that they are able to generate short or medium-term outcomes. To simplify, there will be no point in opening the best community clinics if no one wants to use them or if they have costs that cannot be sustained after the end of the project (in short, if there is no ownership by the community and if they are not sustainable). **When the output-outcome chain works, then the outcomes - concrete and measurable - will be able to contribute (together with other factors and under certain conditions) to achieving long-term impact.**

CHAPTER 1

THE ROLE OF STAKEHOLDERS

curated by Nuria Almagro Carrobles and Gianluca Bozzia

“ *Difference is the beginning of synergy* ”

Stephen Covey

Going back to the project cycle, the Theory of Change is a valuable tool that helps us in the planning phase, allowing a greater focus on the most relevant aspects and enabling the identification of well-defined objectives of change. In the following diagram we have outlined the phase on which this chapter will focus:

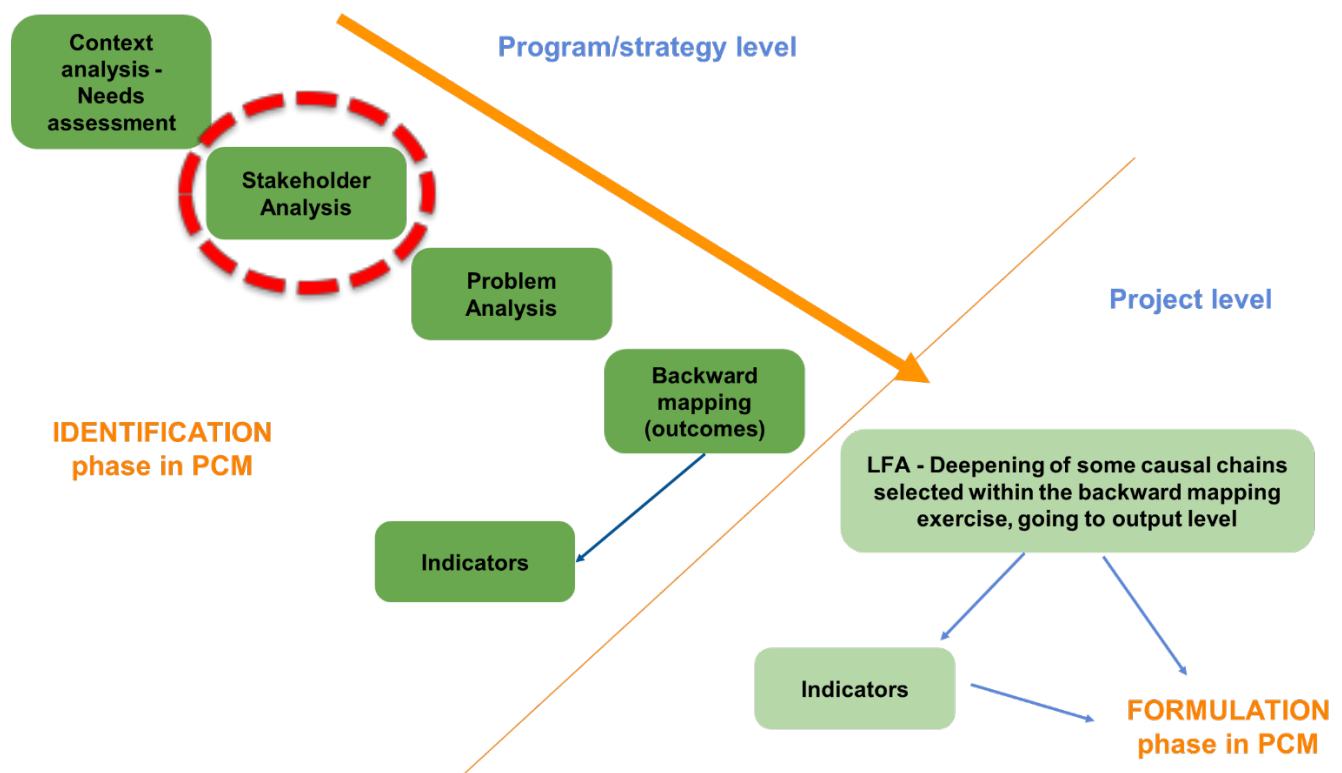


Fig. 5 - Development of a ToC from programme to projects - stakeholder analysis.

The whole Theory of Change is based on a fluid dialogue and communication between *stakeholders*, i.e. those interested in the change that the programme intends to trigger. The active participation of stakeholders was already evident in its own definition quoted in the Foreword: “[ToC is a] rigorous yet participatory process whereby groups and stakeholders in a planning process articulate their long-term goals (impact) and identify the conditions they believe have to unfold for those goals to be met”⁴. Active participation covers all the different phases of the project cycle: from the context analysis, to the identification of the desired long-term change, as well as the formulation of assumptions about how this change might occur and the definition of the sequence of

4 Dana H. Taplin, H el ene Clark, "theory of change basics", acknowledge, New York, 2013, p.4.

events that would allow it to be achieved, the identification of available resources, the choice of the most appropriate activities and methodologies, the definition and measurement of indicators, the implementation, outcomes and projects monitoring and evaluation. Finally, active participation makes it possible to ensure and improve the *accountability* of the whole process.

ChangeLab's methodological proposal aims to give value to the active participation of stakeholders as a distinctive element capable of making a difference in identifying interventions that are relevant, effective, sustainable and impacting. This approach significantly limits the risk of design becoming a routine activity or a mere logical exercise carried out alone, which would result in a ToC with little real-world effectiveness.

Stakeholders are therefore a constituent part of a ToC, both in the planning phase and in design, implementation and monitoring, in terms of impact measurement, transparency and social responsibility.

1.1 The role of stakeholders in the ToC

One of the most difficult things to do in our work - which always takes place in complex contexts with closely interconnected variables - is to identify changes, prioritise, establish a logical chain and thus predict in advance the effect that key interventions will have on intermediate results (changes in terms of outcome) and final impact (*impact*). Therefore, even when experts think they have a clear idea of the problem and what needs to be done, it is crucial to start a participatory process that helps to overcome preconceptions, considering that:

- It is unlikely that one person alone can fully understand all the issues involved in the process of change, whereas a **participatory process allows for a more complete and articulated view**. This is particularly relevant in the case of projects to be implemented in countries or contexts other than one's own, considering the cultural differences and the influence these can have on the process of change. The opinions and expectations of local stakeholders, as well as their knowledge of the context and social dynamics, are a prerequisite for a well-structured ToC that is able to take into account different, sometimes significantly different, points of view both within individual organisations and between different stakeholder groups.
- The participation of a wide range of stakeholders leads to a greater sense of ownership of the process and increases the chances of effective use of the ToC, which becomes a strategic project tool that is also useful for monitoring, and does not remain a mere annex to the project document nor is it "been imposed from above" or imposed.

These decisive factors are compounded by the fact that during project implementation it is relatively easier to have direct control over activities and *outputs*, ensuring that services and products are the best possible. However, it is important to remember that real change only occurs at the *outcome* level and that this level necessarily depends on the involvement of key stakeholders (see Figure 6). In other words, the achievement of *outcomes* is not under our exclusive control. Only the participatory process and the stakeholder *engagement strategy* can increase the possibility of achieving greater impact.

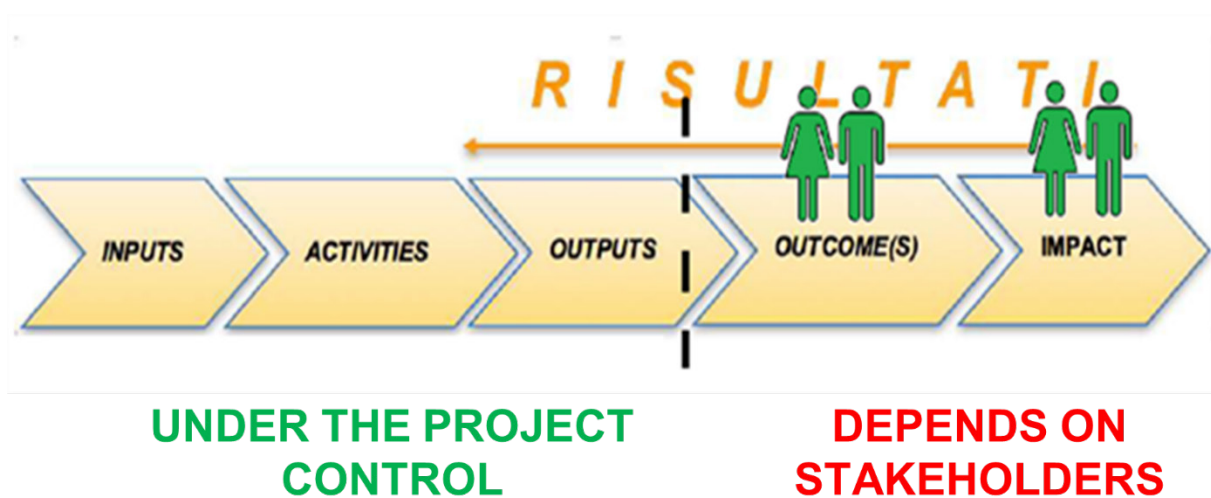


Fig. 6: Chain of results.

1.2 The process: mapping key stakeholders

The identification of the main actors to be involved in the preparation of a ToC must be based on a map of the different stakeholders through a collaborative process of research and analysis of actors, networks and alliances. The first step is a *brainstorming session* with partners and some possible key actors in order to create a preliminary list of the main stakeholders by type. For this purpose, it may be useful to prepare a pre-structured grid (see table 1), detailing as much as possible the single actors and if possible going as far as explaining them "by name and surname". The following example distinguishes three categories of stakeholders, but other types of aggregation are of course possible.

Private sector stakeholders	Public sector stakeholders	Civil society stakeholders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • companies and enterprises • business associations • professional orders • leading entrepreneurs • financial institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ministers and advisers (executive) • departments and civil servants (administration) • selected representatives (legislature) • courts (judicial) • political parties • local governments and councils • military • parastatal bodies and commissions • international organisations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • media • religious institutions • schools and universities • social movements and <i>advocacy</i> groups • Trade Unions • national • international ngos

Table 1: Grid of stakeholders.

Once all stakeholders have been identified the mapping process foresees, for each of them, the analysis of their interest and level of influence (that can impact the project) on the basis of directly or indirectly available information. It can be systematised as in the example reported in table 2, referring to a programme for the social inclusion of ex-prisoners focused on stable employment.

Stakeholder name	Interest in the project/ possible role	Source of influence	Source of interest
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ministry A • Network B of the social enterprise • Cooperative C for work reintegration/ Sportello D • Mister F, leader of prisoners of the center E 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring the sustainability of the intervention • Implementation of active policies for the integration of disadvantaged people • Guidance and technical assistance service for prisoners and former prisoners to enter the labour market • Cooperation for a good cause 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competent authority, economic resources • Change agents, networking skills • Agent of change, effective presence on the ground • Local leader 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction of service-related expenses • Fulfilling its social impact objectives • Increasing the pool of users/ resources • Improving the situation of prisoners

Table 2: Example of analysis of influence and interest.

On the basis of this information it is now possible to proceed with the mapping of the *stakeholders* with respect to whom we will ask "**who has to change and how** in order to achieve the desired long-term impact?" in the next steps of the definition of the ToC (identification of key stakeholders). For this purpose, we can use various tools including the power Grid, (*Stakeholders interest/influence matrix*)⁵ which helps to understand the role that different stakeholders have to play in the desired change. It is a "very visual" and easy-to-interpret tool, and can also be used for monitoring the engagement strategy of key actors.

5 FAO Approches to capacity development in programming: processes and tools. Learning module 2. Revised edition 2015, Tool 2

Two quick definitions:

- **Interest:** indicates the degree of interest in the changes identified by the programme/project.
- **Influence:** indicates the ability to prevent or positively trigger the process of change.

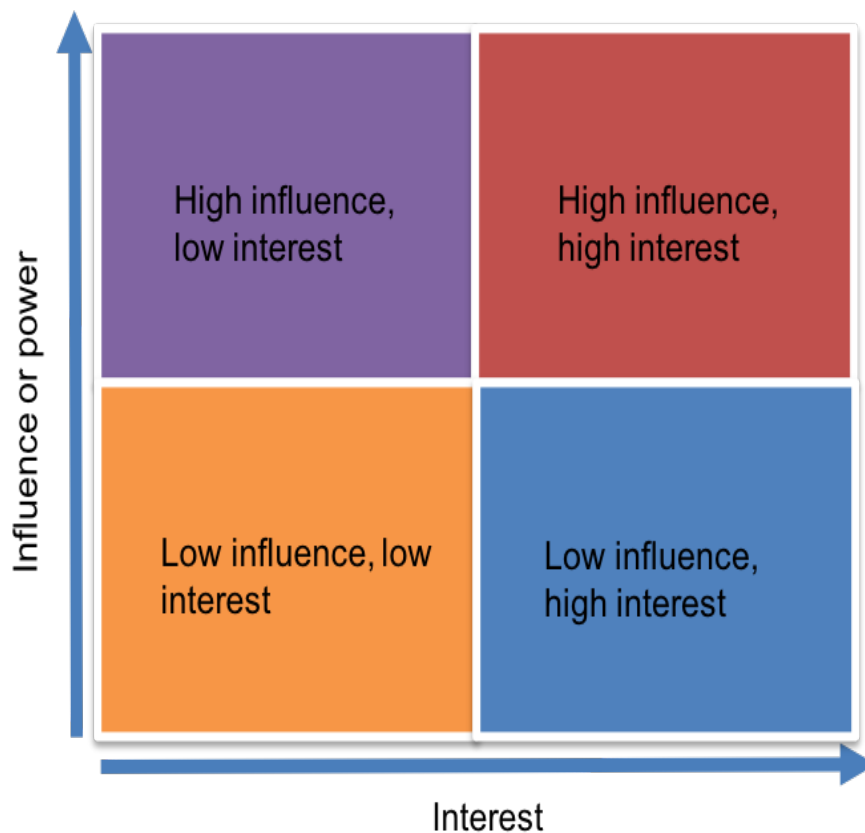


Fig. 7: Stakeholder interest /influence matrix.

Potential **strategic partners** and **key stakeholders** will be chosen from those who have the most interest and influence (top right quadrant of our matrix). It is particularly important to involve them in the planning/design, making sure they understand what is going on and creating a sense of ownership of what is being done. Other key actors may be located in other quadrants of the matrix, and for some of them it will be up to the project itself to increase their influence and/or interest in change, or to contain the risk of a possible change in their positioning within the matrix. Finally, it may be useful to identify where one's own organisation is located within the matrix, as a stand-alone actor in the context.

Once the stakeholder analysis phase has been completed, we can proceed with the analysis of problems and the definition of *outcomes* and the chain of change, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

1.3 Conclusions

ToC changes over time as a consequence of its application: changes are not always linear, they do not always happen as expected and there are positive and/or negative unforeseen impacts. Thus, which are the key elements that an efficient ToC must include? As previously mentioned, a key point is the involvement of stakeholders in all phases of the project cycle:

- In the initial phase of needs analysis, definition of the ToC (including change indicators) and project formulation, using the appropriate tools for each actor. The target group and partners have to be involved in all steps of the process while other stakeholders can be involved at other moments, depending on the role they are going to play. This will depend on the time and human and economic resources available. If, for example, there is not enough time during the design phase to include all stakeholders in the definition of the ToC (because you are responding to a call with an imminent

deadline), you will have to foresee the review and validation of the ToC with stakeholders among the first project activities;

- During the implementation of the programme/project, by continuously updating and reviewing the ToC, also monitoring how the stakeholders themselves change as a result of the interventions;
- During the evaluation of programme/project results according to the MEAL (*Monitoring & Evaluation for Accountability & Learning*) approach.

It can also be very useful to:

- Validate the ToC against evidence: The ToC can gain in quality if one is able to demonstrate the soundness of the proposed theory through existing studies, research and impact assessments that support the hypotheses of change;
- Ask for *feedback* from experts or technicians who are not directly involved in the planning/design process, and who can provide elements for reflection and/or identify critical aspects and risks to be considered.

CHAPTER 2

CREATING A THEORY OF CHANGE:

BACKWARD MAPPING

edited by Cecilia Rossi Romanelli and Christian Elevati

“ *The biggest tree is born from a small sprout. The tallest tower is born from a mound of earth. A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.* ”

Lao Tzu (Tao Te Ching)

2.1 How to design a Theory of Change applied to a programm

As mentioned in the foreword, the ToC is a strategic planning approach that is based on the construction of a shared collective vision. According to Rick Davies⁶, it is “The description of a sequence of events that is expected to lead to a particular desired outcome”. For Patricia Rogers⁷, it is the articulation of many underlying assumptions about how change will happen in a programme: it includes ideas, conditions and hypotheses about how situations change, how people and organisations act, how political systems or eco-systems function. Constructing a ToC is thus like drawing a map that indicates the possible paths that need to be followed to generate the desired change. It helps us to understand whether our work is contributing to achieving the impact envisaged by our vision or whether there is another way forward. It thus contributes to the debate among stakeholders, where the various options can be analysed, explored and discussed.

But how do you set up a ToC?⁸ Of course, it is always better to use participatory approaches, possibly using one or more *workshops*, the details of which vary according to the context and the complexity to be faced, the organisational skills and the desired impact. As seen in the previous chapter, the ideal would be to involve all those necessary to the success of our initiative and the realisation of the desired changes. It may be useful at this stage to reflect on those persons, groups or organisations with whom the programme⁹ interacts directly and through whom it can act in the “sphere of influence”, i.e. in obtaining short- and medium-term results (*outcomes*).

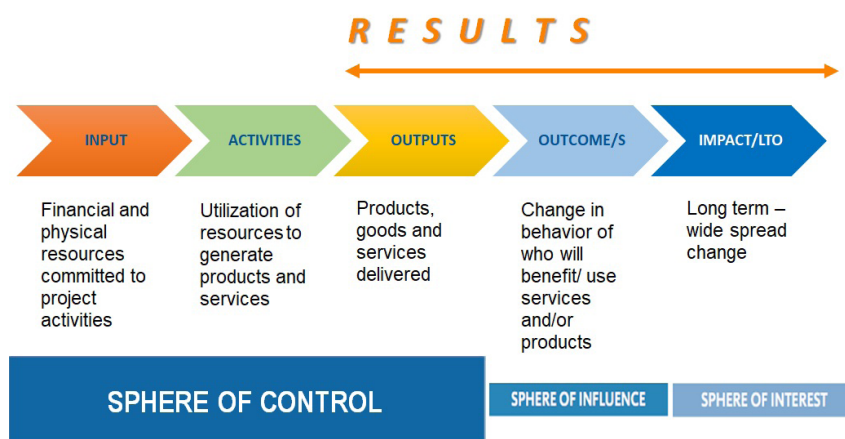


Fig. 8 - Spheres of control, influence and interest on results.

6 Rick Davies, April 2012: blog entry 'criteria for assessing the evaluability of a theory of change' <http://mandenews.blogspot.co.uk/2012/04/criteria-for-assessing-evaluability-of.html>

7 Rogers, P., (2014), Theory of Change, UNICEF http://devinfohive.info/impact_evaluation/img/downloads/theory_of_change_eng.pdf

8 There are many manuals and publications, indicated in the Site-Bibliography, which - together with a significant field experience - allow to prepare a good workshop for the construction of a ToC. Here we would like to indicate the main elements of the process. Please refer to the manuals for further details.

9 Please note that in this guide we focus on the development of a ToC at programme level and how this level can significantly improve our project formulation.

In this text, as highlighted in the guide dedicated to the new Europe aid LF ¹⁰, "results" are defined as all *outputs*, *outcomes* and impacts generated by programmes and projects. As also shown in Figure 8, *outputs* are limited to the provision of goods, products or services delivered to the target groups, while *outcomes* also include the use that is made of them and how they lead to the desired change. The participation of the key actors is of fundamental importance because with them it will be possible to design all phases of the intervention, including the evaluation of results in *itinere* and *ex post*, to establish roles and responsibilities, to obtain the necessary information and to be able to analyse a larger number of variables and thus possible solutions.

At this point we are ready to start with the "backward mapping", that process which, starting from the desired Long-Term Outcome (*LTO - Impact*), will allow us to define all the medium and short-term outcomes (preconditions) that have to be achieved beforehand, both temporally and logically.

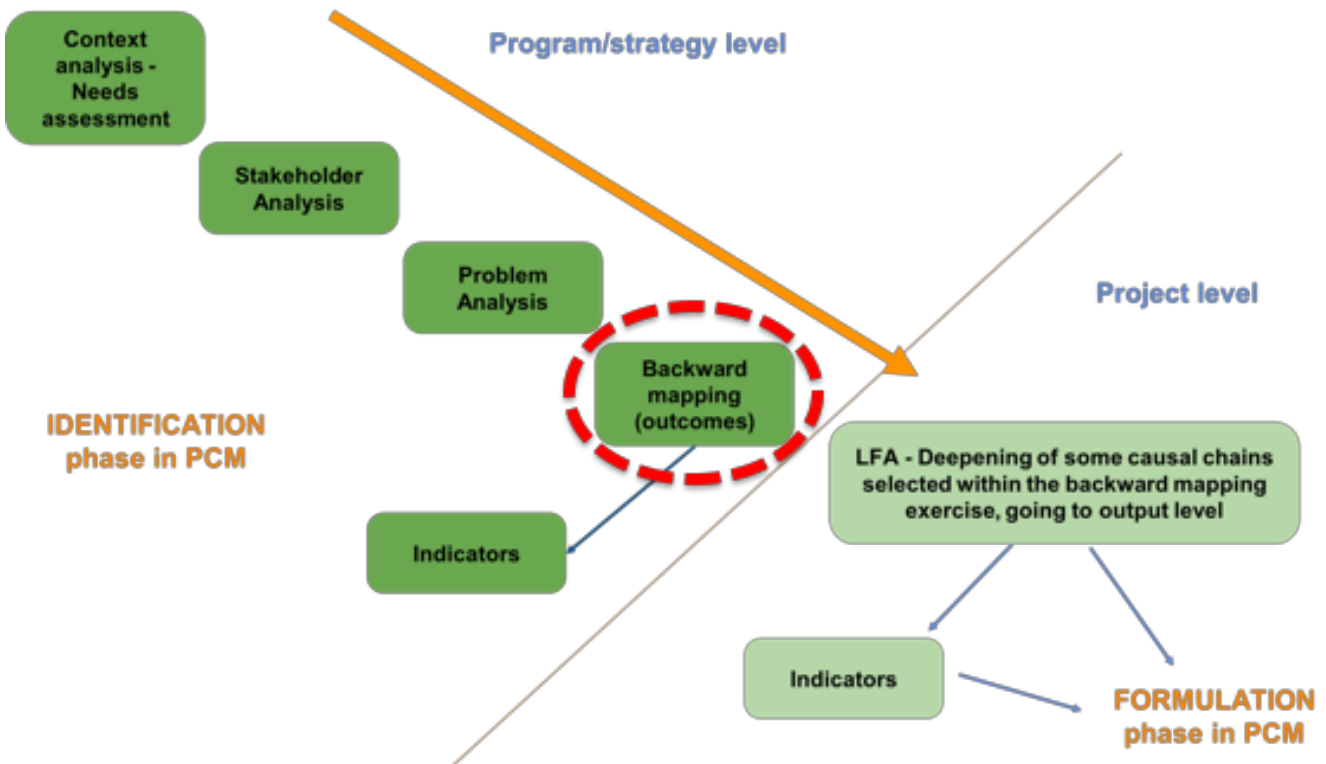


Fig. 9 – Development of a ToC from programme to projects - *backward mapping*

The first thing to do then is to define the long-term outcome of our programme: what is the final big change we want to achieve? What or who needs to change in the long run? If you decide to use a *brainstorming* approach, with the various participants, it may be useful to have sticky notes where everyone can write their personal ideas. Then you can seek consensus between all the ideas and define a common impact. At this stage you should not consider the formulation of the impact as definitive, nor it is necessary to be clear about the time needed to achieve it. These are issues that we will close at the end of the process, when we have clarified the whole ToC. Some questions that can help us in this first stage are:

- When would you say your programme was successful?
- If the local newspaper had to write an article, what would the headline say?

¹⁰ "contributions to the interpretation of the new Europeaid Logical Framework", (http://www.info-cooperazione.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Paper-nuovo-IF_2016_it.pdf).

In the course of defining the impact, but also during the following backward mapping process, elements that we are not able to immediately identify as *outcome*, *output*, **activity**, *input*, context conditions or *killer hypothesis* may arise¹⁰. It is important not to lose anything that emerges during brainstorming, but to "park" these elements by writing them down on sticky notes anyway, in order to pick them up during the following analyses.

Before moving on to *backward mapping*, let us recall our definition of TdC: "rigorous yet participatory process whereby groups and stakeholders in a planning process articulate their long-term goals (impact) and **identify the pre-conditions** they believe have to unfold for those goals to be met. **These pre-conditions are modeled as desired outcomes, arranged graphically in a causal framework**".

Therefore, in starting the process of *backward mapping*, we need to start from the impact and go back to determine all those changes that need to happen first, in the stakeholders we have previously identified, in order for that impact to be reached. As we mentioned in the Foreword, this way of working is almost the opposite of what we are used to because it forces us to ask ourselves: "what are the necessary and sufficient pre-conditions (in terms of outcome = who needs to change how?) that needs to be realised first in order to achieve the impact", instead of "what are the activities that need to be done in order to achieve our goal?". The activities will be identified at a later stage, and only as means to produce the outputs with which we expect to trigger the desired change.

So, with a process of *brainstorming* and going backwards, it is possible to define everything that has to happen before (*pre-conditions*) in order to reach the set goal. The *pre-conditions* will be our *outcomes* and will be organised in a logical cause-effect structure, below the impact. As we move further and further away from the impact, we will define the **outcomes that are logically and temporally** ahead of the impact (the pre-conditions), and those that are closer to the impact. At the end of a first round of backward mapping, we might find ourselves, for example, with an *outcome* map like the following:

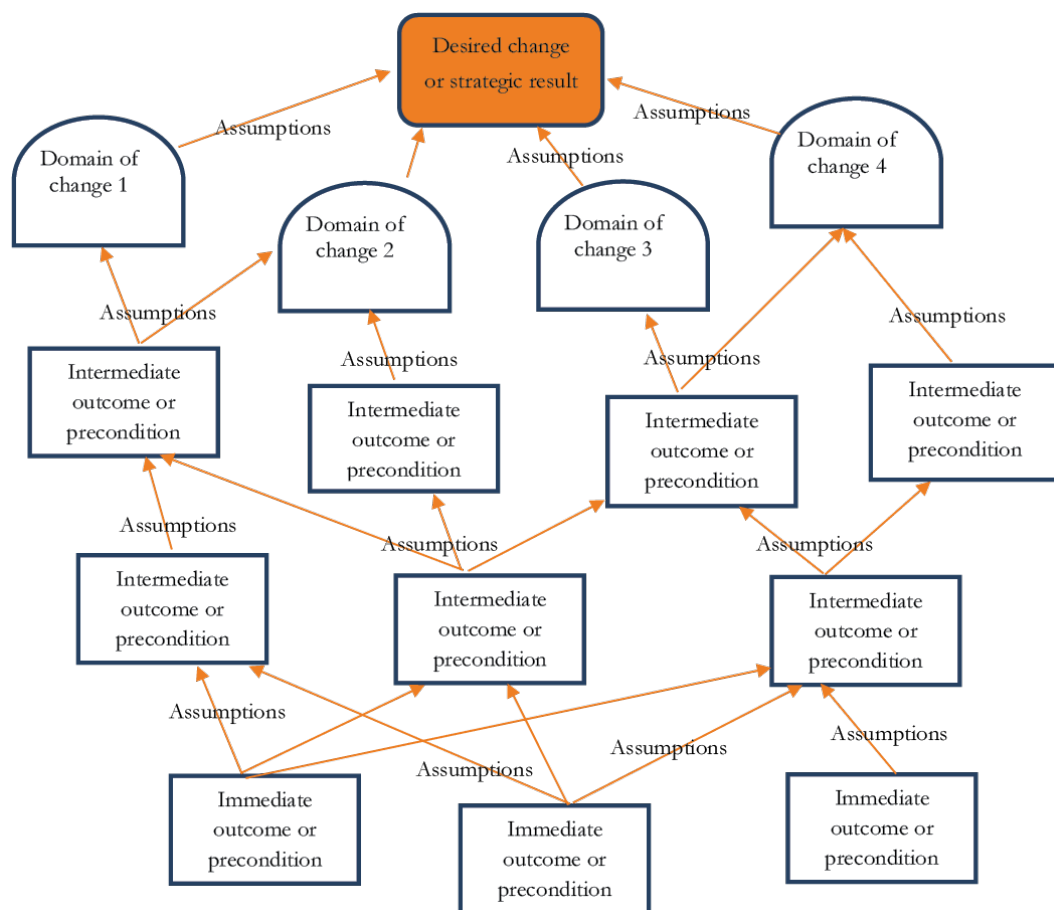


Fig. 10 - Example of backward mapping.

11 *Killer hypotheses* are those contextual conditions beyond the direct reach of the actors in the field which, if they were to occur, would make it impossible or significantly compromise the achievement of results.

We will realise that there are multiple, integrated pathways to change in order to achieve impact, and our choice will depend on the type of approach we want to use (strategy, values, vision...), our starting point (history, skills, resources, territorial roots...) and key stakeholders. But also, by the specific context of intervention, the set of strategies leading to a change, for example in the way health structures operate can change. A different behavior of the over 60 year olds (from now on referred to as Over 60s) in terms of nutrition and a more effective way of interpreting and using communication on prevention by the responsible public institutions, can together make it possible to achieve a structural reduction in health expenditure in a given region (impact). See the following figure as an example without any claim to truth, formal perfection or exhaustiveness. Just to understand how, by successive revisions (erasures, different coloured versions), one could arrive at mapping the changes to achieve an improvement in the health of the over 60s in a hypothetical region X:

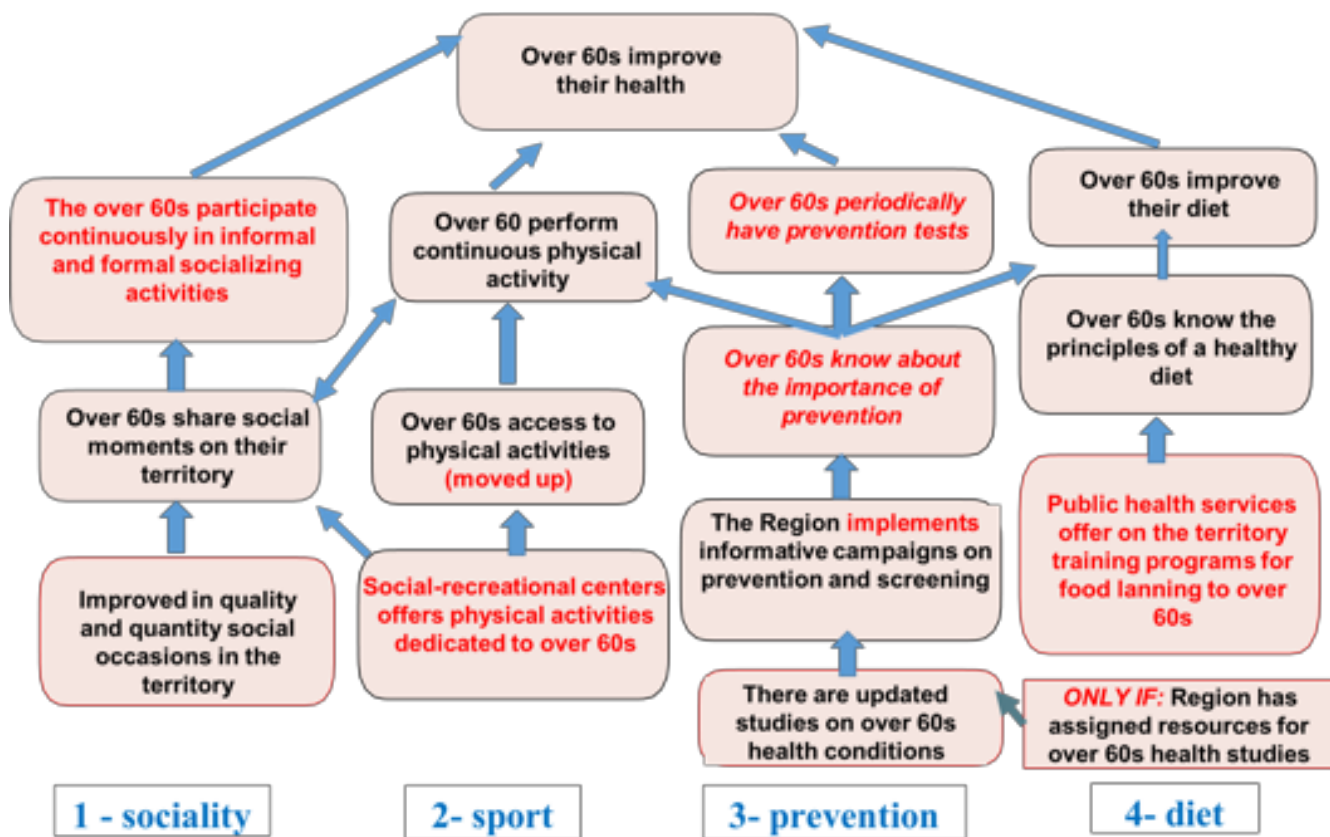


Fig. 11 - Example of *backward mapping* with revisions.

In another region the changes in terms of outcome to reach the same final result might be different. We have already stated several times that the identified *pre-conditions* must be made explicit as outcomes. For clarity, we would like to reiterate that here we mean as *outcome* - in line with EuropeAid - those changes in the medium term that the organisation and partners need to generate at the level of behavior, policy, decision-making, politics, institutional or social systems in the main stakeholders of our programme. They need specific *outputs* to be triggered and all together contribute to achieving impact (generating the chain of results illustrated in figure 8).

2.2 How to describe outcomes

Describing *outcomes* in a clear and rigorous way that best contributes to the definition of the next steps of the ToC is not easy, especially the first few times you undertake this activity. Subsequent revisions may be necessary to arrive at rigorously and formally correct definitions. Here are some practical guidelines for describing good *outcomes* during *backward mapping*:

- **We start** the sentence by specifying **the stakeholder to be changed** (“the farmers...”, “the local agriculture representative of the ministry...”, “the parents of the 0-6 children *targeted* by the project...” etc.).

- We use **active verbal items** to describe how some of the stakeholder's living conditions will change when **the desired change is achieved and** report the objective **as if the desired outcomes have already been achieved** (“...apply drip irrigation techniques”, “...ensure a constant water supply to farmers”, “contribute to community water management” etc.). Please note: 1) only one verb per *outcome*, otherwise we are mixing several outcomes in one sentence; 2) if we are using a passive verb, we have most likely gone down to the *output* level (e.g.: “farmers *have been trained* on drip irrigation techniques” is the *output* of the activity “training courses on drip irrigation techniques”).
- Outcomes should be **expressed positively (i.e. avoid negations;** e.g. “young NEETS are stably employed” and not “young NEETS are no longer unemployed”) as the negation describes a condition or state that is no longer there, but does not say how it has been changed, which is what we are interested in at the level of change to be produced/outcome.

It becomes easier to understand who needs to change and how if we formulate the *outcome* with a specific person in mind (with a face, a name and surname, a certain role of responsibility in a specific institution or association, etc.); it will help us to give concreteness and to remain anchored to reality.

It is advisable not to identify more than 4-6 macro-pre-conditions immediately under the impact of our programme, in order to simplify the process and to obtain a first manageable map which could be our main domains of change). Each of the macro-pre-conditions in turn will then be further developed by asking ourselves what changes in terms of *pre-conditions* it requires in order happen. The process that starts from an *outcome* and moves downwards to identify the changes that have to take place first is also called “unpacking” an *outcome* into its *pre-conditions*. The process has to go on until all necessary and sufficient conditions leading to the achievement of the impact have been identified or until it is realised that we have moved down to the *output* level.

2.3 Assumptions and pre-conditions in backward mapping

During the *backward mapping* process it is essential to make explicit the *assumptions* underlying the reasons why a strategy or programme, in our opinion, is able to achieve the expected results. Often implicit and not based on evidence, assumptions could be unfounded and negatively influencing the entire work of an organisation. It is therefore necessary to identify everything we take for granted: what must happen in the context for the ToC to work? What are the assumptions on which our project or programme should not intervene, but which are fundamental for achieving results? Why do we think our theory works? What evidence do we have? Are there reports from donors or research institutes? Do we have documentation of previous projects that achieved clear results in similar contexts? Can we rely on the experience gained over the years by local partners, supported by relevant documentation? If we wanted to simplify, we could say that **an *outcome/pre-condition (A) describes “who has to change and how” to produce a further change (B) on our way to impact, while an assumption explains “why” (evidence) and “under what stable and confirmed context conditions” (background assumption) we are sufficiently certain that if we produce A we will trigger change B.*** *If an assumption of ours is not given or certain, then it is simply not an assumption!* It will therefore have to be included among the results to be achieved: our programme, through its projects, will have to test it (to obtain *evidence*) or generate it (to create the necessary background conditions).

Also, during the *backward mapping* process, as for the definition of the impact, it may happen that we are not able to disentangle activities, *outputs*, *outcomes*, context conditions, etc.: again, the advice is to unravel all the issues we can and set them out in an organised manner, and then classify them and/or discard what we do not need later.

At this point, we need to look at the result of the *backward mapping* (*the visual and textual map of our ToC*) and *ask ourselves: does it stand logically? Is there enough to get the full picture of the changes? Are the main actors present? Are pre-conditions and assumptions sufficiently solid and integrated? And so on.* If necessary, we can refine and improve our work.

The next step of our ToC at programme level is to decide, among all the *outcomes* that we have assessed as necessary to generate our impact, which ones our organisation (due to its history and mission, competencies and relationships matured over the years, political choice, available resources, etc.) would like to mainly concentrate its efforts on. This also means that in order to achieve impact we will need to ally with actors who can positively influence *outcomes* which our organisation does not want or cannot directly intervene on.

The reasoning behind each ToC - and in our case the strategy guiding our programme - has to be made explicit with clear evidence and briefly presented in a text (the narrative part of our ToC), where we will explain the 'map of change' in terms of stakeholders to be involved, *outcome/pre-conditions*, *assumptions* (indicating the literature and reference documentation at the basis of our choices and assessments), risks and mitigation measures.

Once our programme strategy has been chosen, we can move on to identify specific projects, in which we will define the best outputs to trigger the *outcomes* that are priority and feasible for us, and then design the activities to be put in place and the resources needed to carry them out. Obviously, it is at this point that work begins on one or more project logical frameworks. This is a starting point... not an arrival one, since ToC is also fundamental for the definition of the result indicators and therefore of projects' monitoring and evaluation systems, essential for quality planning.

2.4 From the programme ToC to project: first steps and some practical tips

In many practices, organisations often have to design interventions using logical framework models (LF) that refer to the ToC and require a further step that combines the map created with the ToC with the LF model. Sometimes there is not enough time to carry out participatory *workshops* to define projects or programmes. However, an approach based on the principles of the ToC shows its potential even when starting from a first draft of the LF.

First of all, it must be clarified that, often, the difference between a ToC or a LF is not very clear. Some people have always used the LF approach with a more or less conscious ToC mentality; some others made (or ended up making) a schematic and rigid use of the LF. This risk can be avoided if there is a margin of flexibility, better if encouraged by implementers and donors. However, assuming that we have to work on a four level project, with general objectives (LTO/Impact), specific objectives (understood as medium/short term results, *outcome*), *outputs* (sometimes still called direct tangible results or expected results¹²) and activities, we will try to give some suggestions below:

- let's not focus too much, at least in the beginning, on what we have already written in our first LF draft and let's try to make a horizontal (or vertical) scheme, like the one in Figure 12, with lots of arrows, so that the logical sequence, the map, and the approach is clearer. Let's try to think about the stakeholders that have to change and verify if we have included them, or if the sentences are too general.

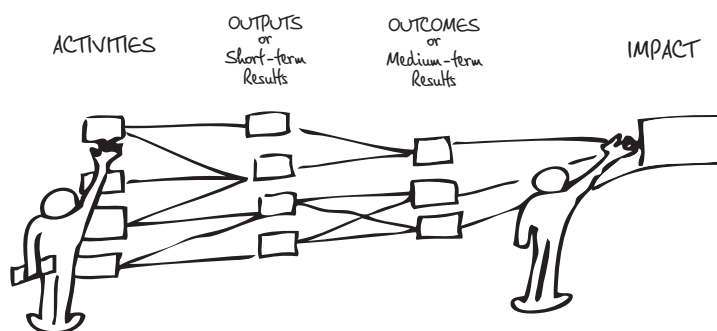


Fig. 12 - Diagram from activities to impact.

12 As in the 2018 AICS Logical Framework.

Let's think as we would have if we had developed the *backward mapping* that our LF should assume. Let's re-read the logic we propose, bottom up, with reference to impact and necessary and sufficient pre-conditions, let's ask ourselves: have I identified the right *pre-conditions*? Does one cause the other? Is everything in place to bring about the change we want in the project's target group?

- By answering these and similar questions it will be possible to highlight contradictions, ambiguities and missing steps, so that - for example - some activities and *outputs* or *outcomes* will end up looking like the same thing formulated in a different way, or a logical consequentiality will turn out to be weak or unfounded, or we will not know who will guarantee the achievement of a certain result. By recreating that logical map called ToC, we will realise which are the pre-conditions we have not considered, the *assumptions* we have thought about but not made explicit, the stakeholders who are missing. We will then be able to put our ideas in order and integrate them, we will understand whether or not the path we have outlined can lead to the desired change and how to improve it accordingly.
- *We therefore seek to establish and distinguish long-term impact (LTO/Impact) from medium-term changes (outcome) and short-term results (output/goods and services produced).* Confusion may arise with regard to the formulation of *outcomes* and *outputs*, just as it is possible to produce too many projects "on paper", with a large number of *outcomes*, *outputs* and activities, which would make the action unmanageable; it will be necessary to identify priorities, to "unbundle" the results and activities into sub-activities for better management, to define clear indicators, in short, to integrate the project with elements that facilitate its understanding and feasibility.
- Let's remember that one of the differences between the ToC and the LF is that the ToC does not potentially put a limit on the number of levels or steps and not even on the possibility of complex links between several *outcomes*, whereas in the LF there are 4 or 5 levels and they are connected by a "vertical" causality only. It is therefore up to the planner to select the steps of the ToC programme which best meet the requirements of the more restricted project LF matrix.
- As already pointed out for *backward mapping*, in the formulation of the various levels of the LF, we avoid more than one verb per sentence or secondary or complex phrases such as "teachers trained through participative seminars with the aim of improving lessons with civic education content". In fact, in the same sentence, three levels are confusing: what I want is to improve lessons, and to do that I think I need trained teachers, who in turn will be trained through participative seminars. Separating the sentences will help to clarify and also to link one level to the next.
- Let's ask the "who": who does it? Who has to change? Who collects the data on the indicators and how? And so on. It is necessary to have clarity about the people or organisations who will have a role in the project and their responsibilities, but also to know the *target* groups very well and to identify the changes we want to achieve and how we are going to verify them.
- Time is a determining factor, both because in the ToC the terms 'short/medium/long term' have a consequential, not only temporal, connotation, and because any reference to results should always refer to realistic and binding deadlines and *milestones* (even with the flexibility of common sense that every complex intervention should bring with it).

Once all these aspects have been clarified, which in the sometimes rigid, hasty and self-referential LF approach were definitely neglected, it will be easier to realise how much our ToC can improve the formulation of our projects.

CHAPTER 3

CAUSAL CHAINS AND INDICATORS: CAN THE TOC FACILITATE THE MEASUREMENT OF CHANGE?

Edited by Federico Bastia and Marina Trentin

“ *Not everything that can be counted counts, but not everything that counts can be counted...*
Or: everything that cannot be observed does not exist?
This is the dilemma ”

Anonymous from the Brembana Valley, 12th century

3.1 Indicators: intuition or process?

In the preparation of a programme/project the definition of indicators is certainly a crucial moment. It is not only a question of preparing the ground for a good monitoring and evaluation plan but, as is well known, this phase constitutes a moment in which a substantial representation of the contents takes place. The definition of indicators, in this sense, represents the moment in which results and objectives are made explicit, clarified and, ultimately, defined within the limits set by the programme/project.

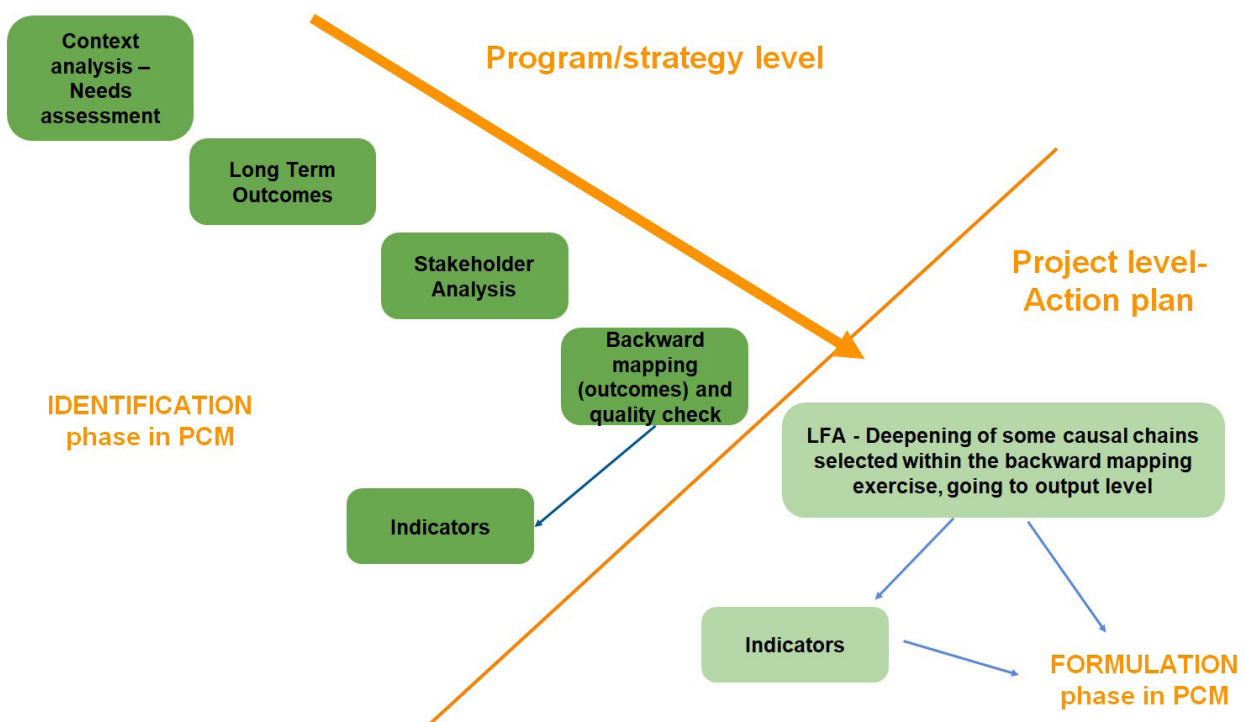


Fig. 13 - ToC from programme to project - deepening causal chains.

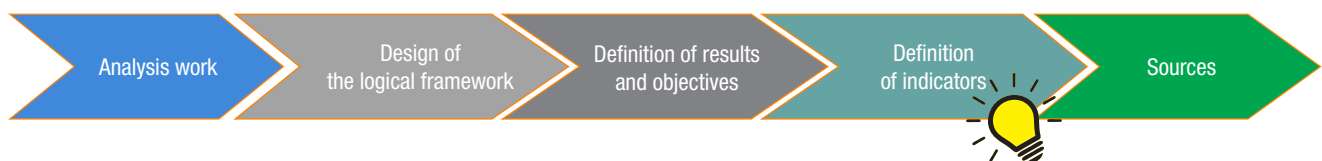
The key question, therefore is whether careful work on defining the ToC facilitates or not the definition of the indicators. The intention of this chapter is to show how this question can be answered in the affirmative, in the awareness that any working method in the planning/design phase cannot turn a bad programme/project into a good one. A good method, however, can bring out the limits of a work and help to identify its weak points and, finally, to direct further research and investigation.

The main reason why the development of a ToC can facilitate the definition of indicators is that the ToC requires a strong analysis of causes and effects and on the conditions that must be indicated in order to generate significant change. Those who are often involved in this process probably agree that the moment in which one chooses the indicators is an almost traumatic and tiring moment where, in front of a result (and thinking about the programme/project) we almost look for an intuition capable of enlightening us (and above all of satisfying the donor). This is due to the fact that we usually arrive at the definition of an indicator at an advanced stage of the planning process, where the framework of activities, results and objectives (to mention the typical levels of a logical framework) is already in an (almost) definitive form.

Without repeating what has already been written in the previous chapters, it is clear that a work which attempts to systematise in a broad and articulate form 'what' lies at the bottom of the programme/project idea is already positive in itself. There is, however, another reason which it is deemed crucial to argue. Without being too reductive, we can claim that in the development of a project idea we often focus on problems, on needs, on what "does not work" today. Logic therefore tends to concentrate in an almost specular form on a scheme that transforms problems into results and objectives (the Logical Framework). Trying to spend time "imagining" and reconstructing a positive future framework, however, makes it possible to make better use of what is already in place in the programme/project context. Understanding how things could develop better "if" something happens, pushes us to understand and identify what is currently happening, whether positive or negative.

3.2 When does the process of identifying indicators take place?

During this last year, through the work of ChangeLab, an attempt has been made to define a working method to facilitate the identification of indicators through the ToC. Firstly, however, it is useful to consider the process that is often used in the development of indicators.



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In this logical sequence, after the work of analysis (of the context, of the strategy) comes the development of the logical framework and, consequently, the work of defining indicators and sources, highlighted with the 'light bulb' in order to indicate how this phase is often accompanied by the anxiety of receiving an illumination on how results and objectives can be 'measured'.

An alternative path, apparently a more articulated one, moves the completion of the Logical Framework to a more mature phase, subsequent to a coherent development of the Theory of Change and certainly after the completion of the "framework" of indicators (at least of the main ones). A sequence of work that can be schematised as follows.

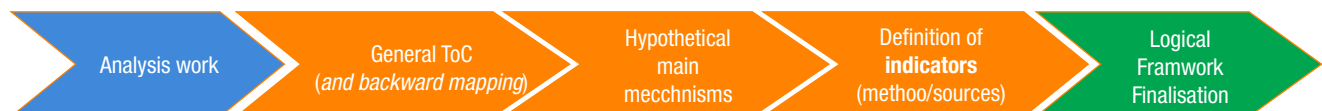


Fig. 15 - Proposed sequence of indicator development

Figure 15 draws attention on two crucial aspects:

1. Firstly, thanks to the deepening of the theory behind the project, the development of the strategic reference framework is set as a process that can be articulated in defined phases, where the finalisation of the Logical Framework is placed after the definition of what the project is able to guarantee as main objectives, results and activities.

2. Secondly, the design shows how the development of the Theory of Change is not in competition with or even a substitute for the Logical Framework. It stands as a preparatory work, broader and functional also to the Logical Framework where the latter, in synthesis, proposes the framework of the project as a strategic and operational choice embedded in a coherent vision of possible change.

The proposed method therefore proposes three operational steps following the stakeholder analysis: *backward mapping* (as seen in the previous chapter), the analysis of current and desired behavioral mechanisms, and the definition of key indicators (which we will elaborate on below).

3.3 Backward mapping as a framework

The development of a first map of major changes has already been set out in the previous chapter, with the example of the improvement of health in the over 60s in Region X: let us start from there. This first snapshot of the Theory of Change is essential to define the general framework in which the potential project will operate. This first picture, basically, after the appropriate checks and investigations, defines a “theory” according to which, in the presence of certain starting conditions, things could change in favor of certain stakeholder groups.

A picture that could be illustrated with the following diagram

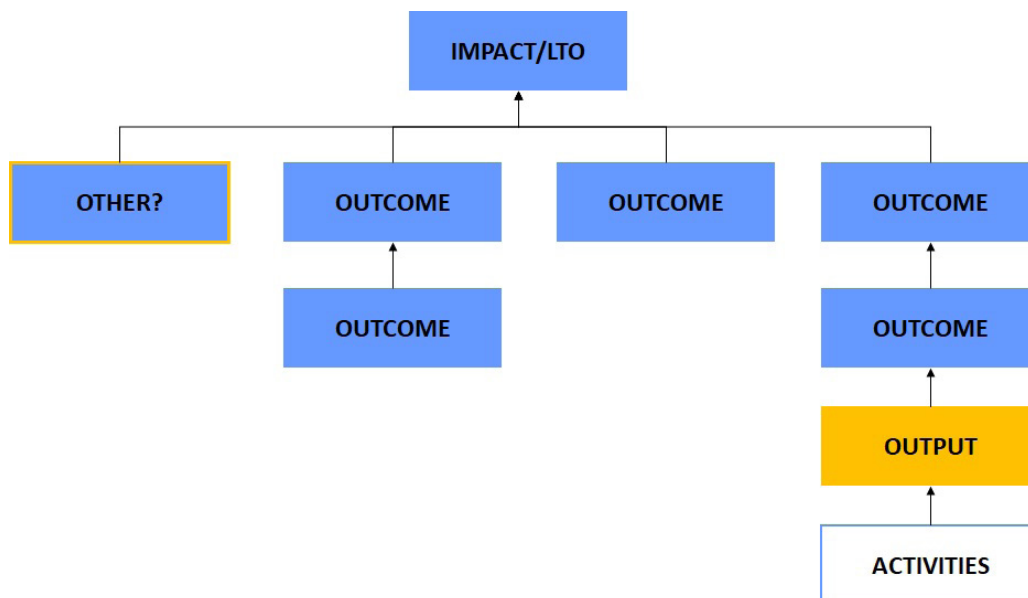


Fig. 16 - Impact diagram - activities

Starting therefore from the above-mentioned example of a programme in favour of the over 60s, **we try - from here on - to go down to the project level, until the *outputs* and activities are identified.** The definition of the reference framework proposed several possibilities of action, aimed at decreasing the public health expenditure related to the over 60s in Region X. When defining an individual project, a first step is to choose a strand of this hypothetical programme, e.g. the component related to the inclusion of over 60s in ongoing physical activities. In a ‘classical’ way, we would work on defining the ‘result chain’ as follows:

- Activity: Training and Awareness-raising
- Result (*output*): increased awareness
- Result (*outcome*): Enrolment in courses for physical activities (behaviour);
- Result (*impact*): Decreased risk (improved health).

In this model the logic seems clear, a hypothesis of change is made explicit and it is not the purpose of this paragraph to contest it. At this point, we could simply identify how to measure these steps. Experience shows, however, that this step is not easy and, at least for the main ‘result chains’ of the project (those which, to be clear, enucleate the main project hypotheses and identify the changes closer to impact) a bigger reflection is essential.

This will allow both the definition of so-called S.M.A.R.T. indicators (*Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound*) and (perhaps above all) an accurate analysis of the medium-long term change to be achieved and on which *assumptions* it is based. Considering the example proposed above, the fundamental questions can be set as follows

- What would have to happen in the context of reference in order to allow certain new practices (behaviours) to manifest themselves?
- What, how, for whom and under what conditions should this happen?
- What do we imagine will happen as a result of the project activities?

It is therefore a question of understanding what the project is actually able to change and, in short, where to look.

3.4 What should happen: the main mechanisms

One way of exploring this question and facilitating reflection on the project’s actual possibilities of modifying (and to what extent) what exists is to ask what the project can actually leverage. In other words, what new mechanisms the project can realistically activate. For this purpose, it is useful to consider each project area as a (reduced) social system where, basically, in a given context (C1), the action of a mechanism (M1) which produces a regularity (R1)¹⁴ is currently recognised.

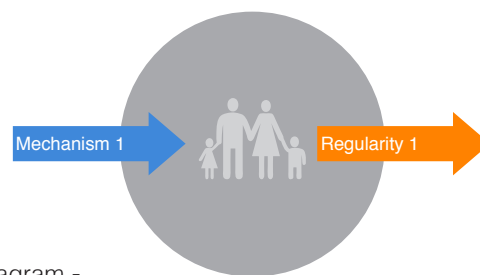


Fig. 17 - Mechanism – Regularity diagram -

In our example, the ‘Mechanism 1’ (which we can assume) is the following: ‘people over 60 have risky behaviour’. or, in a more articulated form: ‘people over 60 do not relate their physical inactivity to the possibility of deteriorating their health’¹³. It can be observed that this second definition focuses better on what is currently happening: the current knowledge is the basis for risk behaviour. It is therefore this specific mechanism (current knowledge = current behaviour) and not something else which, following this example, explains what is happening today. Following this reasoning, we now try to consider what the project proposes. In the example we talk about training and awareness raising. Two activities which can be reduced to the organisation of short information courses and the distribution of communication materials. The *outputs* of these activities are therefore “opportunities” which are offered to the beneficiary. Opportunities which, according to our ToC, we assume to be of interest for our beneficiary and such that they “trigger” a new mechanism (new knowledge = new behavior).

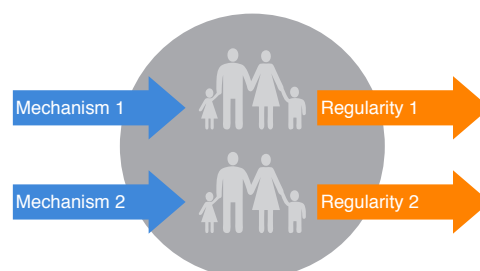


Fig. 18 - Mechanism diagram - regularity in the project context.

¹³ Ray Pawson, Nick Tilley, *Realist Evaluation*, Sage 1997-2001 (http://www.communitymatters.com.au/re_chapter.pdf).

¹⁴ Of course different paths can be taken, e.g. ‘people know the risks, but they do not have access to adequate opportunities such as affordable courses’. In our example, as written above, only one aspect was deliberately considered in order to simplify the reasoning.

The project, according to this reading, inserts activities that create new opportunities (*output*) which, according to the ToC, by triggering a new mechanism (M2), will create a new regularity (R2). What in *backward mapping* was a simple passage from one box to another, emerges therefore as a central aspect for our project. The passage from a regularity 1 (in the absence of the project) to a regularity 2 (induced by the activities of the project), in this framework emerges as the consequence of a modification of the behaviour of the beneficiaries, which, according to the ToC, arises from the ability of the project to offer valid, real opportunities, capable of triggering a virtuous and effective mechanism. In particular, this reasoning becomes central in the distinction between what is strictly under the control of the project (activities and *outputs*) and what the project, following its ToC, aims at modifying as a result of its action (*the outcome*).

The analysis of the mechanisms that the project intends to trigger, following this reasoning, becomes therefore fundamental and unavoidable if we wish to arrive to a realistic and coherent definition of the indicators. **At the project level, the definition of outputs emerges as crucial** since we intend to define exactly the scope of opportunities and offer to our *target group* and, therefore, the conditions that allow the project to assume with reasonable certainty that a real change will be obtained at the end of the action. The *output* cannot only be the product or the service provided, as it must also clarify the minimum *standard* level of “delivery” to the *target group*. In the hypothesis of change (our ToC) the *outcome*, as previously stated, describes instead the (minimum but essential) characteristics of the behavior that sanction the success of the initiative. This aspect is not secondary, and leads to an important basic question that always concerns those involved in project design, management and evaluation. **The distinction between output and outcome, when defining indicators, marks the dividing line between direct responsibility for an intervention and less direct responsibility.** In other words, we could say what, in the vision of action-change, is under the control of the project (*the output*: essentially attributable to the project) and what, instead, should happen (*the outcome*) if the explicit *assumptions* are correct. This reasoning is important because it allows us to think about another crucial aspect which is particularly relevant when defining the indicators of a project: is it a failure (or success) due to the failure (or success) of the theory, or is it due to the failure (or success) of the implementation?

Returning to the example used, consider the following table:

	Situation A	Situation B	Situation C	Situation D
outcome	Do not change the practices	Do not change the practices	Practices change	Practices change
evidence	Trainings did not reach the <i>target</i> according to the expected <i>standards</i>	Aware (informed) people have not changed the practices	Trainings reached the <i>target</i> according to the <i>standards</i> envisaged	Trainings did not reach the <i>target</i> according to the expected <i>standards</i>
Success/failure	Implementation failure	Failure of the theory	Success presumably attributable to the project	Success not attributable to the project

As we have tried to point out, failure has a very different meaning if it is attributable to the implementation or to the theory (situation a and b). Even in the case of success, evaluations of merit may lead to different considerations.

An in-depth study on the ToC thus makes it possible to clarify two areas in which indicators are fundamental in order to understand, measure and evaluate what is intended to be achieved. In our example: is it sufficient to define the number of people trained in order to ‘control’ the execution of our plan (and thus to test our theory)? The answer is of course negative. Other information is decisive and clearly understandable if we consider the mechanism that was presented above. In order to verify the correctness of the theory, at least the following *assumptions* are decisive:

- Training must reach defined subjects and not others;
- Training must be implemented according to quality *standards defined*;
- Training must be aimed at a number of people defined;
- Training must be able to bring minimum elements of knowledge/capacity to people.

In relation to the induced change (the outcome of the training), similar reasoning can be pursued. If a change is determined by a mechanism triggered by the project, it will be essential when formulating the indicators to carefully understand how this can be observed. Simply indicating the number of persons changing behaviour (beyond the difficulties that there may be in the formulation of the outcome) does not facilitate the understanding of what the project has hypothesized. Other *assumptions* may in fact be fundamental:

- Which is the minimum *standard* for defining whether a behaviour has changed into an acceptable form;
- Which are the criteria for understanding whether and how a *standard* is achieved;
- How it manifests itself;
- How many people have to change their behavior in order that a change takes place in a group.

3.5 What variables, what thresholds?

Once the main mechanisms have been identified, we can move on to the stage of identifying the indicators. For this purpose, it may be useful to take up the initial example, trying to pay attention to the chain of change that we intend to investigate and which, for simplicity, is reproduced as a simple and linear chain.¹⁵

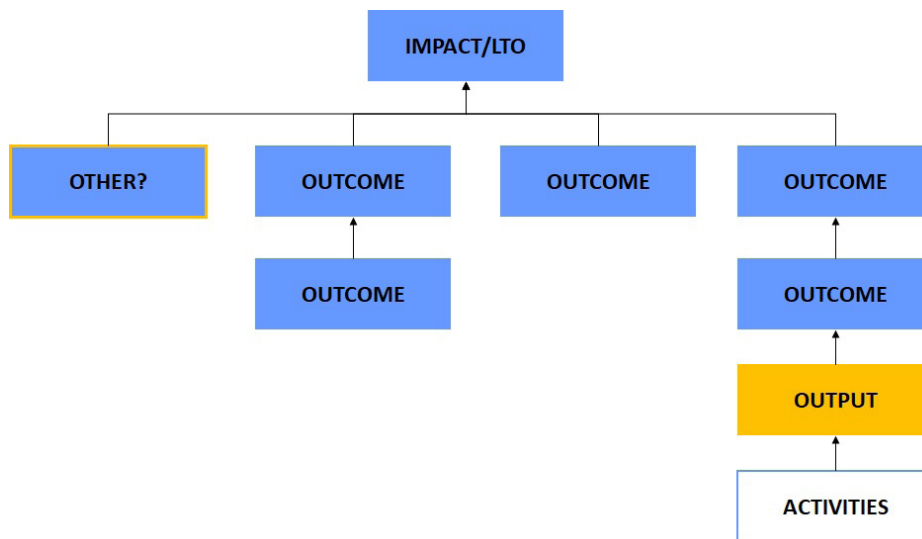


Fig. 19 - Activity - Outcome chain

In particular, taking up the case study, this chain can be schematised as follows:

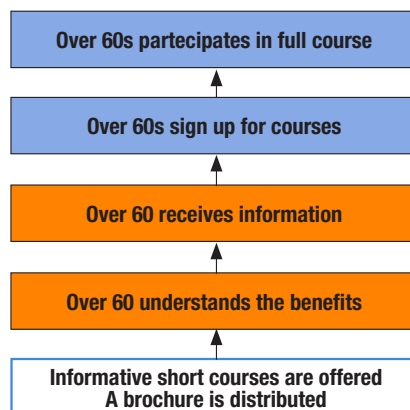


Fig. 20 - Example of activity - outcome chain

In the example we talk about training and awareness-raising. Two activities which can be reduced to a course and the distribution of informative material. They guarantee the *output of the* project for this component which, in the example, defines “the opportunity” which the project will offer to the *target* group:



Fig. 21 - Example of project opportunities.

Following the previous paragraph, the task of the “project manager” is therefore to start an in-depth analysis of the two regularities characterising the hypothesis of change in order to identify the gap existing between the first and the second one (the expected *outcome*).

A table such as the following one can be helpful for this purpose.

Regularity	Activities	Output	Outcome 1	Outcome 2
In the absence of the project (Mechanism 1)	The project organises one or more activities	Beneficiaries receive the services/products of the project.	A change is initiated (a new mechanism is activated: Mechanism 2).	Change generates further change (Regularity 2).
Over 60 is only active in household chores	A counter is activated to provide short courses on the usefulness of physical activities. A short promotional <i>brochure</i> is prepared and distributed at the main meeting points for the over 60s	Over 60 receive information about the options available. Over 60 understand the benefits of the initiative.	Over 60 get active to check in person a subsidised offer.	Over 60 identify an interesting course. Over 60 follow and participate in adult gymnastics courses continuously).

Table 5 - Regularity to *Outcome* scheme

The transition between activity and *outcome* (formulated in the general map of the Theory of Change) is here better structured, with the aim of highlighting not only what the project actually intends to initiate (the outputs), but also what the intervention is based on (the initial regularity) and how this will be transformed into a new regularity. The example basically shows how the *assumptions* underlying the project idea can be made explicit, thus leading to the consideration of the factors which, according to this logic model, are at stake in the desired change process. On this basis it is then possible to proceed to the definition of the indicators.

As is well known, an indicator can take on different forms and characteristics depending both on what we want to highlight and observe and, on its ability, to provide useful information to *management* already at the level of intermediate results, in itinere. If the ToC has the task of defining what is necessary (the *outputs*) so that a change is initiated (the outcomes) and how changes can take place in a rigorous and analytical form, it is clear that verifying the ways in which this process takes place is fundamental. The possibility of observing (= measuring) an element of the process must therefore be guaranteed and remains essential. The central question is therefore how to put in an observable (= measurable) form a process which by its very nature is abstract and defined by concepts that are sometimes complex and difficult to decode.

Following this reasoning, it **becomes central to define well the indicators at output level** (where we will try to measure and substantiate not only the simple action of “delivering” a service but also to clarify well the minimum *standard* of the level of “delivery” to the beneficiaries of what is needed) and the **indicators for outcomes** (where it is instead fundamental to define the reference “standard” that qualifies a given behaviour as a success of the initiative).

It therefore follows that:

- *output* indicators, specify not so much the number of people participating in training, but rather how many beneficiaries have had the opportunity to learn the expected knowledge (quality of information received, timing);
- *outcome* indicators define whether or not a project standard considered to be “successful” has been achieved, highlighting the fulfilment of certain minimum and necessary criteria in order to verify its actual achievement.

This distinction is undoubtedly easier if we had the time and the foresight to investigate the hypothesis of change (*backward mapping + assumptions*), highlighting the current regularities (context and problem analysis) and how the project intends to intervene (*outputs + activities*), as this work allows the more complex steps, implicit in an idea of change, to be dismantled into more concrete and observable steps.

It will therefore be the need of identifying what the project proposes (in terms of “to whom”, “what” and “how much”) and the “before and after” of the two regularities.

Indicators can, as is well known, be quantitative or qualitative, whereby these two types are¹⁶:

The **quantitative** indicator is defined as an indicator that expresses/indicates a quantity in the form of a number, index, ratio or percentage;

The **qualitative indicator**, on the other hand, defines a property, a characteristic of what is observed (often as a synthetic result of several measurements, including quantitative ones).

In conclusion, qualitative indicators focus attention on aspects concerning the quality of the interventions and the opinion of the *target groups* affected by the interventions. In this sense they are a necessary complement to quantitative information. Because of their ability to read change through the eyes of the people concerned, qualitative indicators, even more than quantitative ones, need to be developed and identified together with the *target group*, already at the stage of constructing a baseline¹⁷, i.e. a survey that takes a snapshot of the situation before the start of a project. In our example in a nutshell, the work of defining indicators could be addressed as follows:

Intervention logic	Variables to be observe	Baseline	Target	Source
Over 60 activate healthier behavioural habits	Target individuals who modify their behaviour according to the identified Xy standard ;	X (absolute) number of subjects (<i>target</i>) practising physical activity	Increasing number X + n (absolute) of subjects (<i>Target</i>) practising physical activity with courses	“Y0” analysis carried out
Over 60 formats (<i>output</i>)	Target individuals participating in the courses according to the quality standards developed and acquiring the expected knowledge	Not available	XY% pass the test	Questionnaire administered before and after the training courses

Table 6 - Example of definition of indicators.

The missing elements in this example are of course the initial value (at time 0, before the start of the activities = *baseline*) and the final value (at the end of the project = *target*) necessary to measure the progress (and success or otherwise) of the initiative.

¹⁶ A more complete way of defining indicators is through the concepts of nominal, ordinal and cardinal: a nominal indicator specifies the presence/absence of a property (existence of a function, structure, process, etc.); an ordinal indicator detects the presence of some specific properties that can be ordered according to different degrees (large-medium-small); a cardinal indicator, finally, specifies a quantity expressed as an absolute, relative or percentage number.

¹⁷ See the following paragraph.

The ToC does not solve the problem but clearly directs the work towards a clear definition of what is essential to know in order to design and implement the project. In this regard, at least for the priority components of the project and their measurement, the development of a baseline should be carefully considered. Said baseline, should be achieved as a results of a study that would be better initiated before the proposal is finalised or, alternatively, to be included in the initial phase of the intervention.

The **baseline**, as we will try to illustrate in the following paragraphs, will allow us to have a precise knowledge of the current situation and therefore to evaluate, on the basis of the experiences gained by the proposing body and its partners and other stakeholders, the actual expected progress.

3.6 Building a monitoring and evaluation system

Our central question concerns the possibility offered by the ToC of facilitating the construction of a *set* of indicators and how to bring out the limits of our ToC, its weaknesses and the possible additional research to be carried out. We will see how the search for the most suitable indicators, thanks to the ToC approach, can also become a way of verifying our strategy and proposal.

Let's start again from our example: we had left a linear chain of cause-effect, described by an explicit Theory of Change on which we based the proposal of certain activities, which would produce *outputs* from which a change would be triggered and which would in turn modify the regularity we wanted to change:

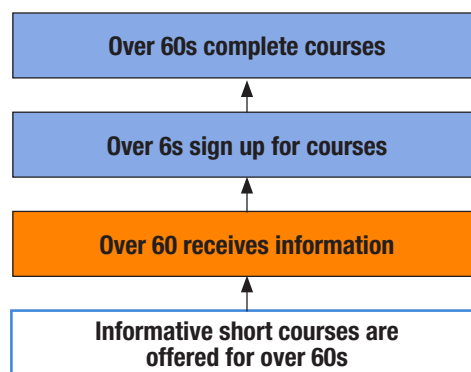


Fig. 22 - Example of an activity chain diagram – *Outcome*

We like the idea of wanting to dispel the myths, proposing an alternative: the first, as we have already said, is that the definition of indicators represents a moment of difficulty, faced only in response the donor's need. It can and should be a proactive moment in which we verify the correctness of our theory and the correctness of our inferences related to the logical connections of cause and effect. The strength of the ToC is inherent in the possibility of changing our logical constructs the moment we realise either that our reasoning does not work, that we cannot demonstrate them, or that we cannot measure or prove what we are producing in terms of output or short or long term *outcome*. The construction of indicators will therefore be a constituent part of the construction of a project proposal, starting from the *assumptions* and ending with the verification of *outputs*.

The second myth we want to dispel is the fear of "doubt", understood as a moment of critical reflection on the theory we have hypothesised, which forces us to test the robustness of our design framework: is the sequence of "if... then..." we have described in the ToC be demonstrated? how? for example, in the case of the over 60s:

- Have the target *groups* of the courses been correctly considered? Are the *brochures* in line with the needs of these *target groups*? Have the brochures been distributed in places accessible to our *targeted audience*, with appropriate geographical coverage? Has the right timing been considered in order to create expectation around the courses, without losing interest? Are the courses accessible to the targeted audience?
- Has an adequate number of materials to be distributed been defined? Has a sufficient number of hours or meetings been defined to properly disseminate the message?
- Has a correct inference been made, clarifying cause and effect links? Or is there a risk (as in table 4) of working on a hypothesis that will not produce the expected effects? Is it feasible and practicable to collect the data that will be used to demonstrate the validity of the cause-effect link that has been hypothesised?

- What evidence can be brought to support our theory? Is it possible to draw on the experiences of others for comparison

Downstream of these questions there will then be a set of indicators to represent and describe the correctness in each of the logical levels of change that we will bring to the regularity that we have defined in our ToC:

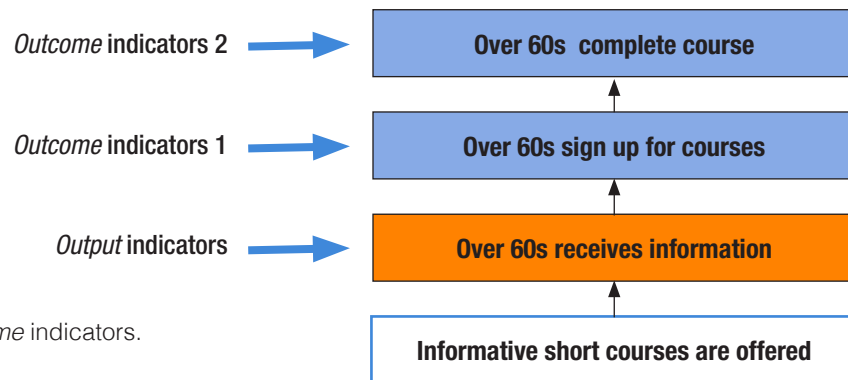


Fig. 23 - *Output* and *outcome* indicators.

Each of these indicators, which will have the characteristics described in paragraph 3.5 according to the logical level to which it refers and which will be measurable and “S. M. A. R. T.”, contributes to the description of a complex situation, which needs the informative contribution of all those who may be competent.

The **construction of indicators, like all processes related to the ToC, will therefore also be a participatory action and have a strategic nature**, to demonstrate how the proposed changes occur and to describe what has to happen (and how) in order to really achieve the desired changes. Indicators can (and should) be defined during all phases of the project, and can (and should) monitor and control all logical levels.

The doubt and verification activity put in place by the ToC pushes to measure the changes (“have we really created a change? how can we say so?”) and to verify their measurability through the verification of the indicators identified, the tools defined for data collection, the timeframe and the scale considered in the definition of the indicators themselves.

The involvement of stakeholders at all levels of the process is crucial to test the robustness of the theory and of the indicators with which we can verify or monitor it: as it has to describe complex dynamics and logics, it is necessary to gather expert and different points of view, allowing to touch on as many aspects and issues as possible. The participatory approach to the construction of ToC indicators is therefore initially laborious, yet it produces shared tools that aggregate different expertise into a single dataset.

To return to our example, another set of possible starting indicators could be the following.

Output:

1. Over 60 receives information: number of *target* individuals reached by the information
2. Over 60 understands the benefits: numbers of *target* individuals who demonstrate knowledge of the benefits by answering knowledge tests on the topic

Outcome:

1. Number of *target* individuals attending courses.
2. Percentage of *target* individuals completing courses compared to the number of initial enrolments in courses.
3. Quality of skills acquired during course attendance compared to an expected *standard*.

It is possible at this point that a number of questions arise, which may cast doubt on our ToC and help to improve it and make the logical steps that constitute it more solid. For example, it is correct to ask whether there is a basic study on the knowledge of the over 60s regarding their health and the behaviors to adopt in order to improve and maintain it, or whether there is a reference *standard* in this regard and who has defined it. It becomes fair to ask whether the communication channels chosen are the correct ones and whether the *target*

audience is really reached or whether the *target audience* is not influenced by factors other than those we are considering, such as the state of mental health or the presence/absence of affections. On the basis of these observations, therefore, we might realize a **need to revise our ToC or to involve actors who have not been considered so far**: who is responsible for conducting large-scale studies? Were they involved in the project or taken into consideration? Are there other course offers with an over 60 *target group* and which *standards* do they use? Has an analysis of the actors and stakeholders been carried out which can indicate which ones have the greatest interest or influence with respect to our target and objective? If not, which tools should be activated, which professionalism and possibly which activities should be added to our project? Do we know all the basic data to be able to measure the progress of our project? Who has them? Can they be made available, or do they require additional costs, complex procedures, the involvement of further partners? Does their collection involve the extension of an activity already included in the project? Is it necessary, after reflection on our indicators, to modify the activities that were initially planned?

As can be seen, the development of indicators is also part of that living, iterative mechanism that leads to the construction of a Theory of Change, becoming a self-verifying process as it is deepened.

Finally, to be appropriate, indicators must be obtainable, have realistic sources of verification and be clear about any data collection procedures and costs. They must also be clearly referenced on a temporal and geographical scale and relevant to the target audience they are to measure.

3.7 Baseline, target and current value

The indicators have forms and characteristics that vary according to what is to be highlighted and what it is useful to evaluate, depending on the logical level to which they refer. The central question is, therefore, how to put into observable form a process that by its nature is abstract and defined by complex concepts that are sometimes difficult to decode. In addition, to requiring the most multidisciplinary and multi-actor contribution possible, the indicators must therefore be brought back to a reference framework that allows comparison with an initial *baseline* value, sets a series of final references (*target value*) and makes it possible to describe the situation at the time of observation (*current value*) in order to assess the level of achievement at intermediate stages. This frame of reference, which will change as the project evolves and the theory is implemented, verifies the achievement of the changes and allows the correctness of the theory to be monitored and modified during the course of the project if it is not correct.

In many cases, the ToC has never been rendered explicit because it has never been developed or it has been hastily developed as a simple mechanical filling in of a form at the donor's request. The **validation of the ToC through the system of indicators becomes even more important** in these cases because, otherwise, right from the start-up phase there will be a possible discrepancy between the activities to be carried out and the logic from which the indicators derive, lacking the logical link between cause and effect and a general reference strategy. The **definition of the monitoring plan and its rereading through the ToC becomes therefore an opportunity to correct the project logic and its description at the level of the Logical Framework**, highlighting the missing steps and information in order to be able to demonstrate the theory. The possible construction of the ToC, if it is not done during the project writing, can however be carried out during the start-up phase, in the monitoring or during the intermediate evaluations, allowing to reconstruct the logical steps until going back to the starting situation and recovering a clear intervention strategy. It is evident that the earlier it is done, the better it is for the project.

Once appropriate indicators have been established, the theory has been verified and any weak logical steps have been reconstructed, verification sources and data collection tools have been identified, *baseline*, *target value* and *current value* thresholds can be established. In particular, baseline and target values must be representative of the time and space interval to which we refer our actions.

The *baseline* describes a situation at time zero, in the absence of actions leading to change: it helps to determine the *targets* for each logical level of the ToC, providing the reference point for determining progress and adjusting project implementation. Its description and the subsequent verification of the Indicators should be conducted in a participatory way, acting as a moment of comparison and verification of the quality of the theory behind our project: the more it is shared by actors and stakeholders, the more it will allow consistency to expectations and action strategies. Furthermore, a well described *baseline* allows the donor to appreciate the

change brought by the project through clear and credible data, which can be compared with similar contexts. In some cases, a considerable effort including economic effort is required to define the *baseline*. Therefore, it is important to consider the need for a dedicated budget, either as part of a country's knowledge strategy, or as part of project activities, or from monitoring and evaluation activities. In other cases, e.g. when applying the ToC to a project that is already underway, it may be necessary to carry out research to reconstruct the initial pre-project conditions, e.g. through the use of key informants or historical data collections. In some cases, it may be useful to define a *context baseline*, i.e. an initial description of the general context in which the project is intended to operate, which may provide information or explanation about the intended impact and how the context may affect the project negatively or positively, or to clarify the strengths/weaknesses of the context on which the project intervenes. These are indicators that will not be affected by the initiatives carried out by our project however, they can provide a reference that contextualises any changes in the effectiveness of the project through impact indicators.

In conclusion, the presence in the Logical Framework of columns dedicated to the collection of these values makes it a continuously evolving tool, which is extremely useful in the management of the project or programme. In a monitoring system, the Logical Framework remains a "living" tool, which through the updating of the *current value* indicates how far we deviate from the expectations we have defined through the *target value*. This continuous control of our degree of attainment of the indicators gives us the possibility to check whether the inference is correct, whether the time and space intervals we have set ourselves for verification are sufficient, over- or under-dimensioned, or whether the indicator is really giving us an answer. Above all, it verifies whether our action is really generating *outcomes* through the logic and *outputs* we have given ourselves or whether, instead, it should be modified. It suggests how to do it: through the involvement of the actors while cultivating a critical approach.

CONCLUSIONS

OPPORTUNITIES AND CRITICALITIES OF THE TOC IN INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

edited by Christian Elevati and Federico Bastia

Opportunities and critical issues in the international context

An important study dedicated precisely to the “review of the use of ‘Theory of Change’ in International Development”, carried out by Isabel Vogel¹⁸ for the UK department of International Development (DFID), has made it possible to highlight the opportunities and criticalities of the use of ToC in international cooperation:

ToC (like PCM) is first of all a process and then a product. It should be seen as an analytical process based on continuous comparison and learning, capable of significantly enhancing planning/design, strategy, implementation, evaluation and impact measurement (in a word, all phases of the project cycle).

The **quality of the ToC lies in the ability to explain the reasons behind our strategic and planning choices**, which must be based on evident, transparent and proven information, clearing the field of worldviews, beliefs, prejudices and conditioning which, acting implicitly, can become very dangerous. Making these *assumptions* explicit is by no means simple: it requires time and negotiating skills, it obliges us to come to terms with power relations, and it presupposes the true participation of all stakeholders.

Working with the ToC requires time and resources that need to be taken very seriously, especially in the initial formulation and start-up phase (while the workload decreases significantly once the ‘cycle’ is in place). Everyone, from donor staff to country managers, from local partners to civil society are often under pressure from various deadlines and daily duties. This requires, on the one hand, a very pragmatic approach to ToC, simplifying its implementation without distorting it and, on the other hand, significant support from institutions and donors.

ToC is able to create extremely strong organisational frameworks, which significantly improve project design and management, evaluation and continuous learning, **provided that:**

- **Key** internal and external **stakeholders can discuss and exchange their** personal, organisational and *visionary assumptions* in a context and approach that is open to learning, non-judgmental or - even worse - punitive.
- **The ToC** is used to explain the ‘how’ and ‘why’ the chosen strategy should produce the desired change and **allow for the exploration of new possibilities, enhancing critical thinking, confrontation and challenging dominant models and ‘narratives’.**
- **This openness to critical thinking involves cross-checking with documentation from** qualitative and quantitative research and scientific literature, as well as **field experience and knowledge gained over time** from stakeholders and partners.
- **Different paths**, even non-linear ones, **are identified within the ToC**, rather than just one (the ToC is not a logical framework!).
- **The ToC thus constructed is used as a ‘working document’ that can learn and change** based on

¹⁸ Isabel Vogel, “review of the use of theory of change in international development”, dFid, 2012 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/dfid-research-review-of-the-use-of-theory-of-change-in-international-development>

feedback from implementation monitoring and periodic evaluations, rather than as a rigid prescription for dogmatic and unchangeable change processes.

- **Lenders and donors are able to make changes during implementation** based on evidence-based information (*impact/performance management*).
- **The ToC and its graphic representations are used to promote a more dynamic, transparent and intensive exchange** between donors, organisations, institutions, partners, communities, in order to challenge taken-for-granted knowledge and open up new areas of high-impact intervention.

ChangeLab's point of view

From an operational perspective, there are therefore various and articulated reasons why it seems advantageous to allocate time and resources to reflect on the assumptions on which the project, the programme and the entire organisation intends to base its actions. Obviously, a fundamental doubt remains in the debate: how successful an investment in ToC actually is. While theoretical study can certainly lead to greater awareness of the potential and limits of developing interventions, the actual return that a professional, an organisation and a donor can have in the long term by committing intelligence, organisational resources and time, is less clear. The impression gained by the ChangeLab group over the last few years is that, in addition to a greater focus on making interventions more robust, the environment for the donor-implementer (and perhaps also implementer-citizen and implementer-recipient) relationship should also change. The system of calls for tenders not only imposes an unbearable consumption of resources (for donors and implementers) but, at present, it does not in itself guarantee an improvement in the interventions. On the contrary, in many cases it hinders the achievement of lasting and verifiable results, keeping the economic and human resources of all those involved constantly under stress.

From this point of view, the commitment to make (social and international) cooperation more efficient and effective cannot be resolved exclusively in a technical, methodological vision. If this is a real interest, it is essential to consider the problem of imagining and experimenting forms of collaboration between the actors in the field (institutions, private social actors, companies, civil society, etc.) capable of giving importance to investments in the quality of the models that are to be launched (and tested). Forms of collaboration that are able to reward genuinely innovative and transformative investments and guarantee the resources needed to ensure that the funds invested in the interventions do not end up in a sequence of activities, well accounted for and about to be abandoned the very day the funds run out. Forms of collaboration, in short, capable of going beyond calls for proposals and beyond individual *grants*. However, ChangeLab intends to work on this rather broad, difficult and uncertain area of research in the near future by launching new collaborations.

GLOSSARY

Accountability: It is the responsibility of organisations to be rigorously accountable for the results of their work, both externally, in particular to those towards whom their action has the greatest impact (stakeholders and donors), and internally, to their members and with reference to their mission and values. Accountability should concern all stakeholders and not only those who are able to ask for it. This implies the need to build relationships of reciprocity and the opening of truly participatory spaces.

Activities: the actions and services that the organisation creates, develops and manages within a project or programme. They are directly under the control of the organisation.

Assumptions: are the beliefs, assumptions, knowledge and statements that underline the reasons why we believe that a specific intervention strategy will lead to certain *outcomes*. Often implicit and not based on evidence, they can be influenced by: ideologies, values, preconceptions, stereotypes, worldviews, social norms, religious beliefs, cultural traditions, habits, established power cores.

Baseline: Qualitative-quantitative information on the situation or conditions prior to the start of a programme or project with regard to the **indicators** and the **target group**. The *baseline* describes a situation at time zero, in the absence of the actions that we think will lead to change. In some projects it may be necessary to disaggregate data by gender, geographical location, age or other variables.

Current value: values of the indicators at the time of observation, which allows an assessment of the level of achievement of an outcome at various intermediate stages of the programme/project.

Impact/performance management: a management process of systematic and periodic review (based on in itinere monitoring and periodic evaluations) that allows the organisation to realise - on the basis of the previously elaborated **Theory of Change** - what has been achieved and why certain results have been achieved, in order to make changes in operational assumptions, structure, internal systems and procedures, staff, use of resources and so on, so to improve the ability to achieve the desired results.

Impact: the *long-term* and wide-ranging social, economic, environmental, civil society changes of a programme/project, achieved after its conclusion. Unlike **activities**, **outputs** and **outcomes**, it does not depend only or mainly on the activity of a single organisation, but also on the role of other actors, partners, stakeholders and specific context conditions.

Indicator: expresses the qualitative or quantitative variable able to provide clear and measurable evidence of the achievement of results. Qualitative indicators, particularly useful for assessing **outcomes**, are usually complemented by narrative descriptors, beyond the purely numerical value, which is however necessary to measure progress from the **baseline**. A balanced mix of qualitative and quantitative indicators is used in impact assessments. They need to be made explicit for each level of the *output-outcome-impact* '**results chain**' (see '**results chain**'). They require specific sources and verification tools. **Input (Resources):** are the resources that are made available and used in a programme/project, including personnel, time, skills, materials, space, funding, equipment, and voluntary work.

Outcome: change in the medium term that the organisation wants to generate at the level of attitudes, behaviours, decision-making processes, policies and social systems. They can be intentional and/or unintentional, positive and negative. They require specific **outputs** to be realised and contribute to achieving the **impact**. If referred to the overall strategy of the organisation, they are the reason why the organisation exists, often summarised in the mission.

Outputs: are the products, infrastructures and services that are generated, provided and/or managed (courses provided, schools built, micro-credits granted, etc.) and that require specific resources (**inputs**). They help the organisation to achieve the desired **outcomes**. They are the means to an end (change), not the end itself.

Pre-conditions: all **outcomes** are also pre-conditions because they represent the changes that need to be made in order to achieve the desired **impact**. In the definition of the **Theory of Change** they are identified through a critical thinking process called backward mapping, in which the question is asked which are the changes without which it is unthinkable to generate a certain **impact**, changes that therefore have to be made “before” logically and temporally (hence the prefix “pre”).

Result chain: is the logic, based on causal consequentiality, that defines the path and strategy of the programme/project. It refers in particular to the **output-outcome-impact** chain. It is based on the explication of **assumptions** developed in the **Theory of Change** and includes the analysis of favourable or unfavourable context conditions that may influence the achievement of results, modifying the link between **output** and **outcome** or between **outcome** and **impact**.

Stakeholders: Stakeholders are people, variously constituted and structured entities, institutions and companies that are affected positively or negatively, directly or indirectly, by the actions of the project or programme.

Target Group: stakeholders directly affected by the action and protagonists of the change to be achieved.

Target value: compared to the qualitative and quantitative measurement of indicators at the beginning of the programme/project, the *target* value represents the final value to be achieved thanks to the activities and resources put in place at **output**, **outcome** and **impact** level.

Theory of Change (ToC): a rigorous and participatory process whereby groups and stakeholders in a planning process articulate their long-term goals (impact) and identify the conditions they believe have to unfold for those goals to be met. These conditions are modeled as desired outcomes, arranged graphically in a causal framework.

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