

'Theory of Change': thoughts on grounding the concept

Broad Concept

- The *raison d'être* for international aid initiatives is to create social change.
- Any initiative implicitly aligns with a 'theory' about how desirable social change might be achieved—a 'theory of change'¹.
- To bring about social change, human actors interact through time within a social system².
- One role of an initiative design document is to explicate the 'theory'—the temporal sequence of relationships ('actors') and issues ('factors') that will be resourced and influenced to create the desired change.
- One role of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is to test the 'theory'—to judge the extent and merit of the changes fostered by the initiative³. These judgements are required to satisfy demands for accountability ('to prove') and learning ('to improve'); and ultimately to critique the underlying 'theory of change'..
- The aim of maximising learning as the driver of continuous improvement is central to a 'theory of change approach'.

Philosophical Aspects

- A 'theory of change approach' recognises that, by definition, social change takes place through a temporal series of interaction between human actors within a 'social system'. No humans, no change. N.B. This is an 'actor centric' or 'interpretist' epistemology of social change⁴.
- A theory of change must succinctly describe or represent the change process in a way that is meaningful to the actors involved (i.e. 'ontology'). Social change processes are represented in various ways such as: a hierarchy, a chain, a ripple, an onion, a branch, a network etc.
- Explicitly articulating the 'theory' underpinning a design can help to foster greater curiosity among stakeholders concerning the efficacy of the design. This in turn can foster meaningful debate and reflection about what works and what doesn't work (and correspondingly less defensiveness on the part of designers and implementers).
- The articulation of a theory of change requires an elaboration of the causal steps and the likely constraints or barriers to the change process.

Practical Aspects

- Any theory can be expressed in terms of hypotheses.
- Any aid initiative can be conceived as a 'policy experiment' within which a 'theory of change' is tested⁵.
- A 'theory of change' for an aid initiative can be expressed in terms of a hierarchy of 'hypotheses of change'—statements that describe the role of actors/factors through time.
- Hypotheses of change should explicate both the 'actors' (i.e. the sequence/chain of stakeholder relationships) and the 'factors' (i.e. the enablers/constraints experienced by each class of actor) that will be required for the desired change to be borne out.

¹ Davies, R. (2002). *Improved representations of change processes: improved theories of change*. Biennial Conference of the European Evaluation Society, Seville.

² Rogers, E. (1962). *Diffusion of Innovations*. New York, The Free Press.

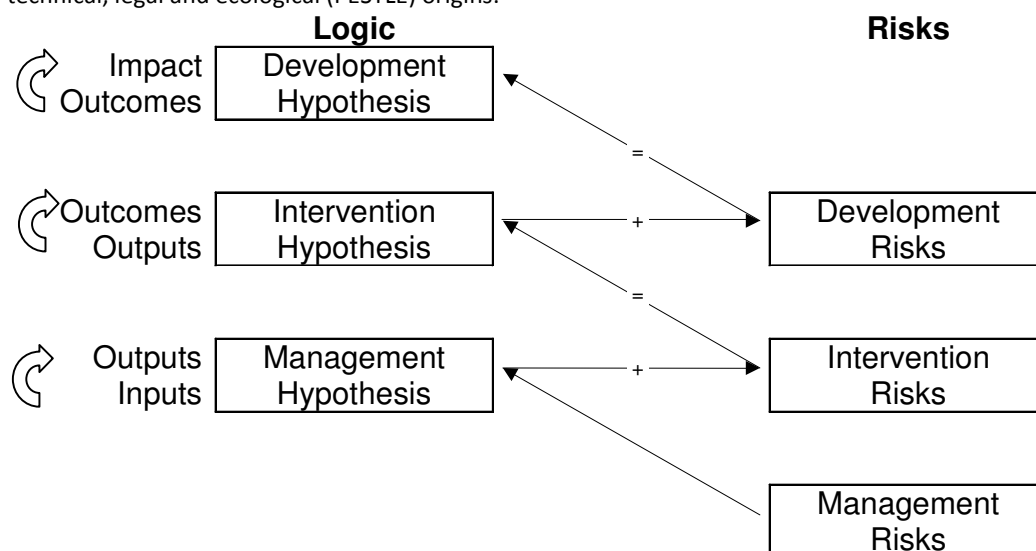
³ Cole, G.E. (1999) Advancing the development and application of theory-based evaluation in the practice of public health, *American Journal of Evaluation*, September 1999, vol. 20, no.3, p 453 – 470.

⁴ An 'interpretist' epistemology of social change can be contrasted with a 'functionalist' epistemology since it appreciates social change from the perspective of the *actors* who are involved with/experiencing the changes. A 'functionalist' theory of change tends to focus exclusively on the *factors* of change, abstracting the human actors involved. See: at http://www.aid-it.com.au/Portals/0/Documents/070105_Aristotle%20and%20Plato%20at%20it%20again.pdf

⁵ Rondinelli, D. A. (1993) *Development projects as policy experiments: an adaptive approach to development administration*, Routledge, New York.

'Theory of Change': thoughts on grounding the concept

- Most aid initiative designs are grounded in a three-stage theory of change involving three broad classes of human actor:
 - **Implementing team:** people responsible for disbursing budgeted resources in order to deliver initiative 'outputs' within agreed time and quality parameters.
 - **'Boundary partners'**⁶: those individuals, groups, or organisations with whom the initiative interacts directly and anticipates opportunities for influence or change ('outcomes').
 - **Ultimate beneficiaries:** people among whom an initiative expects to foster significant and lasting changes ('impact')—the *raison d'être* for the initiative.
- A 'management hypothesis' articulates who will convert initiative resources into the key deliverables required to influence the desired outcomes: "With [inputs] the [implementing team] can deliver [outputs] that [quality standard] within [timeframe]".
- An 'intervention hypothesis' articulates who will directly benefit (or be influenced by) the delivery of initiative outputs, and the nature of the benefits/changes that will result: "[Outputs] will foster [outcomes/changes] among [boundary partners]".
- A 'development hypothesis' articulates the stakeholders that will ultimately be impacted by changes effected by partners: "[Outcomes] realised among [boundary partners] will foster [impact] among [ultimate beneficiaries]".
- The success of each hypothesis in the hierarchy is contingent on the management/containment of a series of constraints or risks. These risks are likely to arise from an array of political, economic, social, technical, legal and ecological (PESTLE) origins.



- Arguably the most common weakness in initiative designs is the abstracting of human actors who are central to the success of each successive hypothesis.
- Identifying and monitoring the risks associated with the theory of change is an important source of learning⁷.

⁶ The International Development & Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada uses the term 'Boundary Partners' to describe pivotal human actors that sit on the 'boundary' of the 'project world' and 'the real world' (Earl, S., Carden, F. & Smutylo, T. (2002). *Outcome Mapping: building learning and reflection into development programs*. Ottawa, IDRC). Other analogous terms include 'primary beneficiaries', 'direct beneficiaries', 'change agents' etc.

⁷ "Learning results from being surprised: detecting a mismatch between what was expected to happen and what actually did happen. If one understands why the mismatch occurred (diagnosis) and is able to do things in a way that avoids a mismatch in the future (prescription), one has learned." (Gharajedaghi, J. (1999) *Systems thinking: managing chaos and complexity*, Oxford).