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Theory of change for project planning: A facilitator's guide

Content

Introduction

Have you ever felt stuck in a discussion about what is an output and an outcome, and/or struggled to figure out what belongs where in a log frame?

Have you ever been confused about what the project proposal that you just read really wanted to achieve and how?

Does commenting on affiliate's proposals sometimes feel cumbersome, with drafts being sent back and forth in a process that feels endless?

If you can answer yes to any one of these questions, then this document is for you.

The guide presents the essentials of a theory of change approach to planning and can be used by secretaries, project managers and planners to:

- Identify and make sense of the changes affiliates want to achieve.
- Explain how, and why, affiliates think they can achieve desired changes in their members lives.
- Identify strategies and action plans that are flawed – even before the implementation of a project starts.
- Complete a logframe, without endless discussions about 'what goes where'.

Basically, a theory of change approach to planning is just about asking – and trying to answer – two simple, yet difficult questions:

Why do we think that our work, or proposed project, will make a positive difference for workers and their trade unions?

How will the capacity building, worker mobilisation, awareness-raising, counselling and collective bargaining and other activities that we plan, or propose, bring us closer to our goal? In fact, will they bring us closer at all?

This document is meant to help you answer these questions. It will also introduce you to the concept of theory of change as an approach to reflection and learning.

First and foremost, this document is meant to be a working guide to joint reflection, which your affiliates and you can use, when planning new projects. You can also use its content, and the corresponding exercises, when facilitating ToC project-planning processes.

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1. A Theory of Change to learning

This learning guide has its own implicit theory of change. The document is based on the belief (backed by neuroscientific research) that a learning process is most effective if:

1) Training participants find it meaningful, and there are limited distractions during the learning process itself
2) It focusses on the problems or challenges we are to solve anyway.
3) We are in a positive mood and feel comfortable.
4) We give our brain the required time and space to digest and process what we have learnt.

Therefore, we do **NOT** recommend that you read this document from end to end, on your way to work or while you a busy doing other things.

To get the most out of the learning process, we suggest that you:

✓ Allocate yourself some free time to read this, in a comfortable place and with the phone and computer turned off; preferably together with your colleagues.
✓ Work with one or two sections of the document at a time, and spend some time reflecting on how, what you have read applies to your life or your work. The guide includes questions for reflection that can facilitate this process. Throughout the guide you will find this sign as a reminder to take a break or a pause.
✓ Use a project that you are planning, or quality assuring, as a case study. This will enable you to practice the ToC approach on a piece of work that you have to do anyway. Hopefully, the result will save you time and help you to produce a higher quality project document.
✓ Remember that learning is a process. Learning to apply a theory of change approach to project planning is no different to any other learning process. You will master it with time and practice, to the point where you will be able do it without even thinking about it.

What we expect you to learn

After you have familiarised yourself with this document, we hope that you will feel inspired to think critically about how, and why, trade unions and their partners work contributes to desired changes. This implies that you and your affiliates:

- ✓ Know what a theory of change approach is, and how it applies to your work and life in general
- ✓ Are able to detect and identify what 'change' is and that you can identify the change(s) to which your work contributes – including being able to distinguish between a change and an activity
- ✓ Can formulate a change statement, and know how to use change statements as the building blocks of a 'change pathway'
- ✓ Know how you can use assumptions to reflect critically on your change pathways and to monitor the viability of your work, when you implement it.

2. What is a 'theory of change' approach to planning and reflection?

A theory of change *approach* to planning and reflection enables us to think critically about what we do and why we do it. Ultimately, we apply this approach with the aim of improving the quality of our work.

A theory of change is basically a *belief about how – and why – we think we can contribute to change* or progress.

A theory of change is an approach to reflect on the link between our beliefs, our actions, and the results (changes) we aim to create

Almost everything we do in life is based on our implicit beliefs about how and why we think we can bring about change. Sometimes these beliefs are based on our own experience, or are simply assumptions we make, which – again – are based on underlying beliefs about life, human nature, or society. At other times our beliefs are evidence based, based on the experience and knowledge of others, and/or partly or fully verified by research.

All-together, our position in society (whether we are rich or poor, men or women, or young or old), our personal beliefs and values shape our mental models and inform

our own 'theories of change'. Just think about the discussions that unfold between older and younger generations across the dinner table. Representatives of the young generation will often explain any disagreement by saying that 'old people know nothing about life, today'. On the other hand, representatives of the older generation will say that the younger generation's lack of experience causes them to hold immature and ignorant positions, and beliefs about life. The truth is that both groups' beliefs about how change takes place, and why the situation is as it is, are shaped by their positions and roles in society.

A theory of change approach is an approach to reflection that enables us to make these implicit beliefs explicit. Ultimately, so we can reflect about them critically and learn from the process. It is a mirror we can use to reflect on the way we plan and to assess our beliefs about how we *think* we can facilitate a change.

Take the example of how we ensure that workers voice is heard. Some trade union leaders will argue that a non-confrontational approach, where workers and employers meet at the negotiation table is preferred. They will be guided by a *theory of change* or belief that *if* a relationship of trust – or at least respect – and mutual understanding of each others' needs and interests is built, *then* workers voice will be heard and their demands will be considered by the employer. Such trade union leaders will therefore prefer negotiation over action.

Other trade union leaders will be guided by the belief (theory of change) that if workers organise collectively and strike, then employers will realise the power workers have and give in to their demands. Such leaders will therefore argue that a confrontational approach and strikes are much more effective to ensure that workers voices and demands are heard.

Obviously, the ' right' answer and most feasible strategy will depend on the context and the actors involved in the conflict. So the point to make is rather that all of our actions, be it in the world of work or privately, are based on our implicit beliefs about how – and why – our choices and actions will lead us to the desired result.

Yet, only when we make these beliefs *explicit*, can we articulate how – and why – we think a practice will contribute to a desired change. Only then we can reflect critically on the soundness of our action or seek evidence in the literature or in our own experience that will support our beliefs. Then, afterwards, we can correct the beliefs if they are proven wrong.

Exercise # 1

Think of a situation in your own life. For example, this could relate to how you attract new affiliates to your organization, secure cadre development or deal with labour disputes, or seek to deal with a specific problem or challenge.

➢ What is the implicit belief (theory of change) that guides the way you act or behave?
➢ Is your belief sound? Why? Or why not?

Tip: Use the following formula to answer the first question: Our actions (e.g. develop new leadership) is guided by the belief that **if** we do ………., **_then_** this will result in ……… This is so **_because_**…….

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3. Where do we find theories of change?

As mentioned earlier, theories of change exist in almost everything we do. From the way we raise our children to the way we plan our work.

There are also several theories of change in trade union's work. Some are very operational and practical, and others are more programmatic and are mainly meant for priority setting.

In developmental work, we usually distinguish between three different levels of theories of change: Organisational, programmatic or thematic, and project theories of change.

Organisational theories of change are very generalised or conceptual, and are mainly used to clarify and legitimise an organisation's mission. They explain how an organisation contributes to its long-term goals. In the 'world of works', global union federations and national trade union's development cooperation is for instance often guided by a theory of change – or belief – that if we strengthen trade unions' ability to engage in collective bargaining and protect workers' fundamental rights, then this will reduce poverty and contribute to sustainable development. This is so, because workers will benefit from decent salaries and working conditions, which again will improve their standard of living and reduce social tensions. Therefore, at this level, theories of change are mainly used as a tool to communicate an organisation's profile and

Organisational theory of change ⇨

Program or thematic theory of change ⇨

Project theory of change ⇨
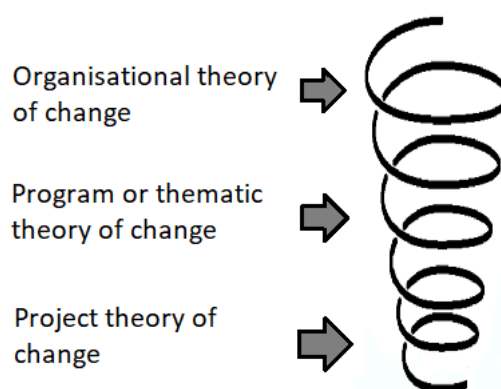
overall focus, and to define the issues on which an organisation is working. Not all organisations have an *explicit,* organisational theory of change. However, by looking at an organisation's mission and vision, it is still possible to extract the implicit belief (theory of change) of how it will contribute to its long-term goals.

Thematic or program level theories of change are more operational. This type of theory of change usually describes how – and why – an organisation believes it can achieve, or contribute to achieve, goals in the medium to long-term.

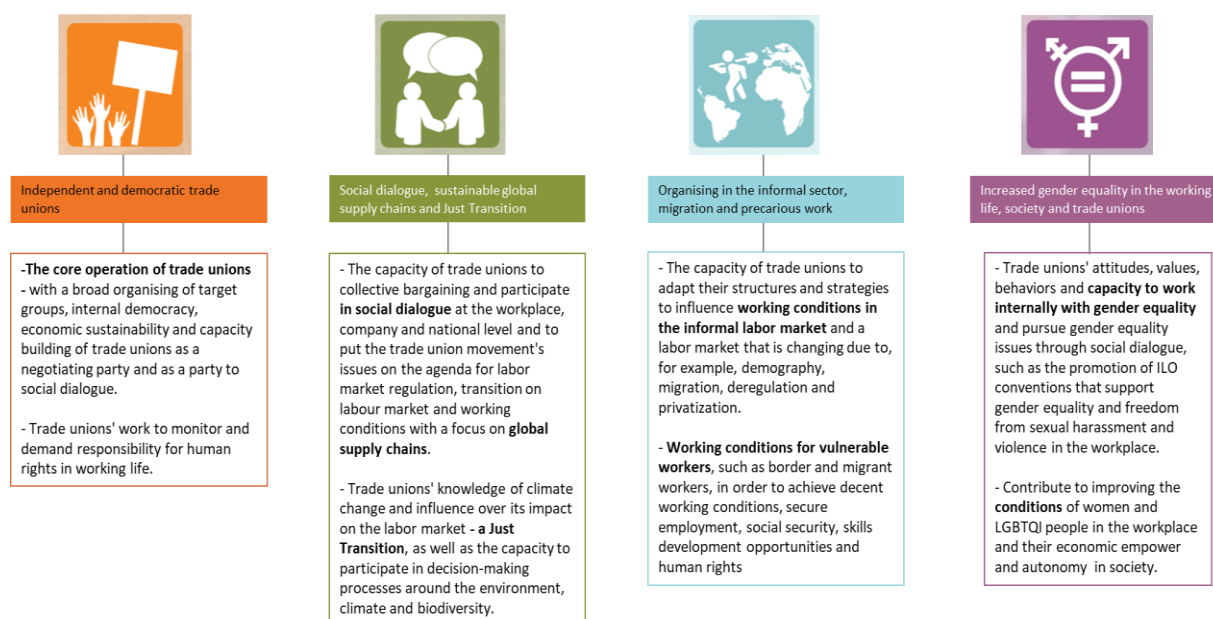Thematic or program level theories of change *inform the choice of interventions* or 'outcome categories' on which a program will focus, within a theme or geographical area, to achieve its goal. This facilitates cohesion between multiple project interventions and partners, as all of the partners or projects work towards the same outcomes, or according to the same, overall theory of change.

Union to Union's thematic areas

1) Thematic area 1. Independent and democratic trade unions

2) Thematic area 2. Social dialogue, sustainable supply chains and a just climate transition – a "Just Transition".

3) Thematic area 3. Organising in the informal sector, migration, and precarious work

4)Thematic area 4. Increased gender equality in the working life, society and trade unions.

Union to Union's Thematic areas: Strategy 2022-2026

Independent and democratic trade unions	Social dialogue, sustainable global supply chains and Just Transition	Organising in the informal sector, migration and precarious work	Increased gender equality in the working life, society and trade unions
-**The core operation of trade unions** - with a broad organising of target groups, internal democracy, economic sustainability and capacity building of trade unions as a negotiating party and as a party to social dialogue. - Trade unions' work to monitor and demand responsibility for human rights in working life.	- The capacity of trade unions to collective bargaining and participate **in social dialogue** at the workplace, company and national level and to put the trade union movement's issues on the agenda for labor market regulation, transition on labour market and working conditions with a focus on **global supply chains.** - Trade unions' knowledge of climate change and influence over its impact on the labor market - **a Just Transition**, as well as the capacity to participate in decision-making processes around the environment, climate and biodiversity.	- The capacity of trade unions to adapt their structures and strategies to influence **working conditions in the informal labor market** and a labor market that is changing due to, for example, demography, migration, deregulation and privatization. - **Working conditions for vulnerable workers**, such as border and migrant workers, in order to achieve decent working conditions, secure employment, social security, skills development opportunities and human rights	- Trade unions' attitudes, values, behaviors and **capacity to work internally with gender equality** and pursue gender equality issues through social dialogue, such as the promotion of ILO conventions that support gender equality and freedom from sexual harassment and violence in the workplace. - Contribute to improving the **conditions** of women and LGBTQI people in the workplace and their economic empower and autonomy in society.

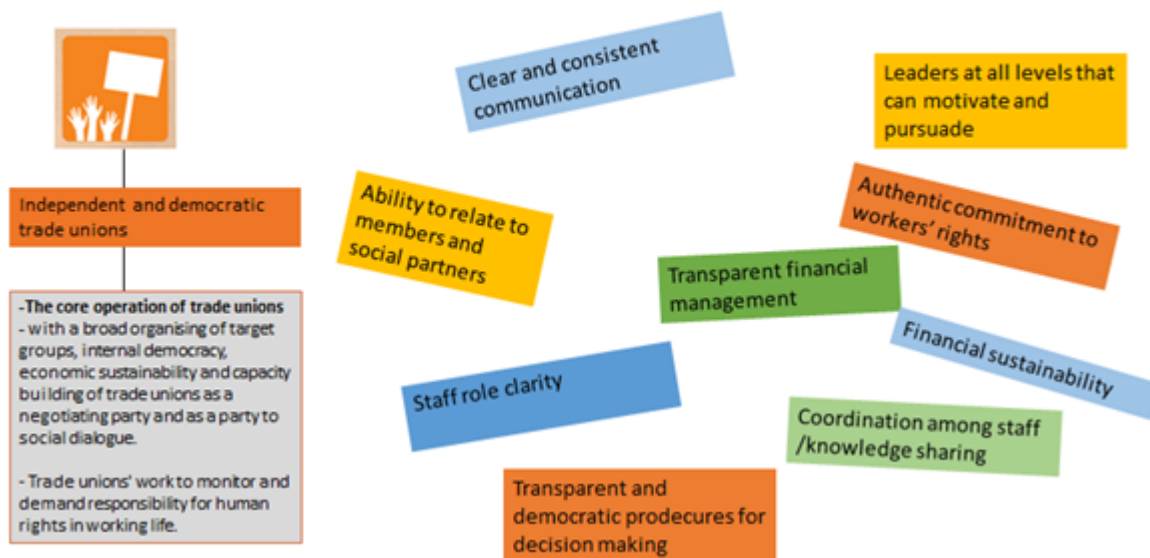**UNION TO UNION**
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The implicit, overall theory of theory of change is therefore that *if* trade unions are independent and democratic (an represent members' needs and concerns, *if* they engage effectively in social dialogue, include organizing of workers in the informal sector and work for equal opportunities between gender identities,

Then this will strengthen workers' collective bargaining power and contribute to decent working conditions and living wages for workers in low- and middle-income countries, which again contributes to sustainable and inclusive development.

Each of the four programs have several outcome categories – results/preconditions that must be achieved, either partly or fully, to reach the overall thematic program goal. Some of those are outlined below.
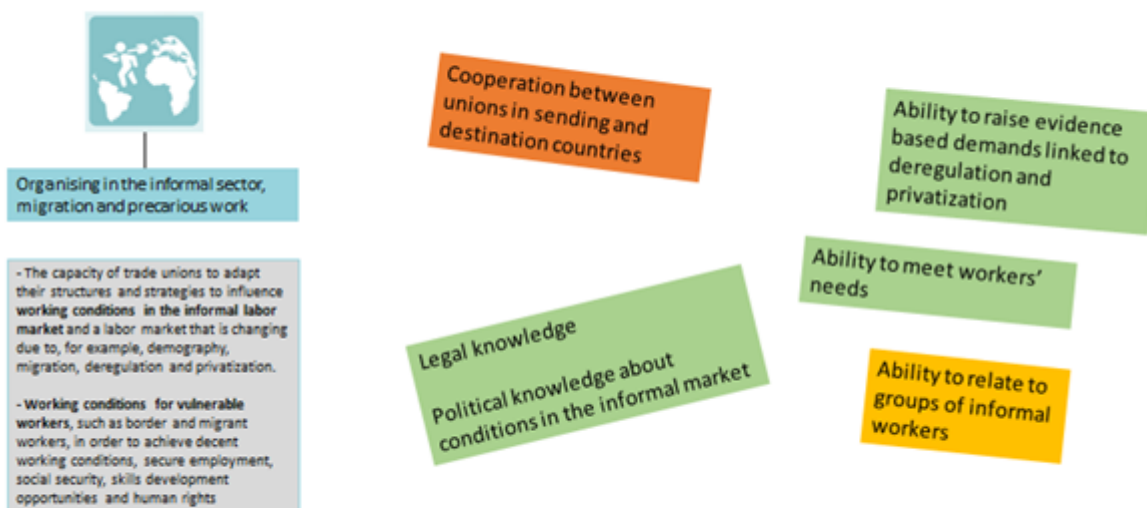

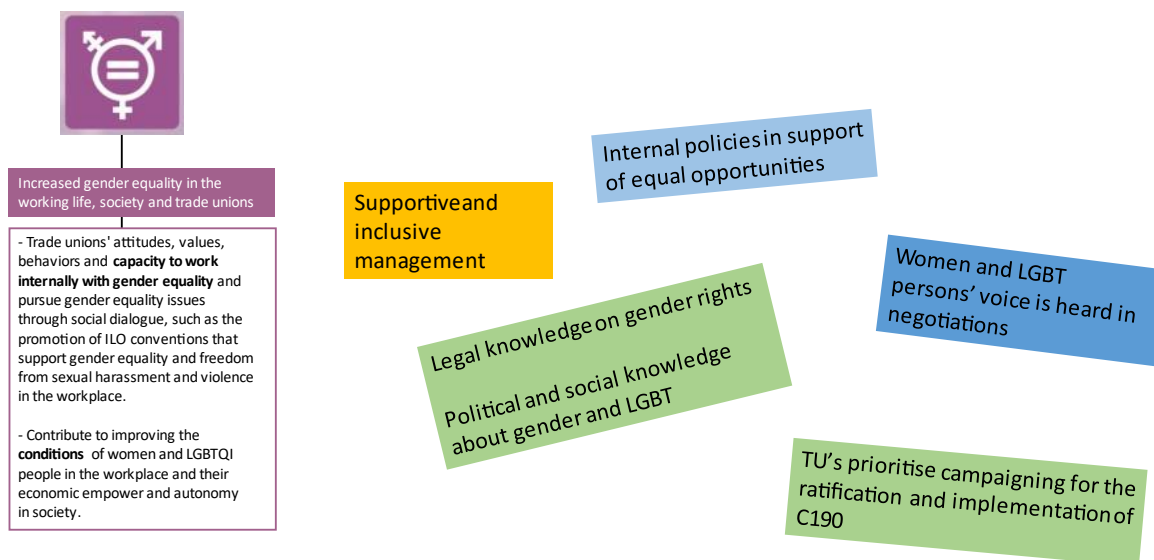*Independent and democratic trade unions – what does it take?*

Social Dialogue – what does it take?

Social dialogue, sustainable global supply chains and Just Transition

- The capacity of trade unions to collective bargaining and participate in **social dialogue** at the workplace, company and national level and to put the trade union movement's issues on the agenda for labor market regulation, transition on labour market and working conditions with a focus on **global supply chains**.

- Trade unions' knowledge of climate change and influence over its impact on the labor market - a **Just Transition**, as well as the capacity to participate in decision-making processes around the environment, climate and biodiversity.

Ability to raise evidence based demands

Strategic partnerships with other TUs

Ability to assess workers needs, political oppotunities and feasibility of negotiation strategies

Ability to monitor progress and adjust

International solidarity and affiliation

Ability to conduct legal and political analyses

Access to windows of opportunities

Knowledge about climate transition, opportunities and threats for workers

Organising in the informal sector – what does it take?

Organising in the informal sector, migration and precarious work

- The capacity of trade unions to adapt their structures and strategies to influence working conditions in the informal labor market and a labor market that is changing due to, for example, demography, migration, deregulation and privatization.

- Working conditions for vulnerable workers, such as border and migrant workers, in order to achieve decent working conditions, secure employment, social security, skills development opportunities and human rights

Cooperation between unions in sending and destination countries

Ability to raise evidence based demands linked to deregulation and privatization

Ability to meet workers' needs

Legal knowledge

Political knowledge about conditions in the informal market

Ability to relate to groups of informal workers

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Promoting gender equality – what does it take?

Increased gender equality in the working life, society and trade unions

- Trade unions' attitudes, values, behaviors and **capacity to work internally with gender equality** and pursue gender equality issues through social dialogue, such as the promotion of ILO conventions that support gender equality and freedom from sexual harassment and violence in the workplace.

- Contribute to improving the **conditions** of women and LGBTQI people in the workplace and their economic empower and autonomy in society.

Supportive and inclusive management

Internal policies in support of equal opportunities

Women and LGBT persons' voice is heard in negotiations

Legal knowledge on gender rights

Political and social knowledge about gender and LGBT

TU's prioritise campaigning for the ratification and implementation of C190

The outcome categories under each thematic area are mutually supportive and interlinked. The overall, longer-term goal will only be achieved when all categories are realised. Therefore, projects should contribute to one or more of the outcome categories described, to be eligible for funding. These outcome categories will inform the project's objective.

Program and thematic level theories of change are more operational than organisational theories of change, but still take a significant amount of 'big picture thinking' and context analysis in order to understand how legislation, government reforms, or public discourses are changed and how they contribute to the ultimate goal.

Like organisational theories of change, program level theories of change are hard to verify, because the desired change: the goal, is still medium- to long-term and is influenced by numerous factors and actors outside the program's direct or indirect sphere of influence.

Project theories of change are highly operational. For this reason, some organisations also call them theories of action (ToA). They are used to guide and legitimise specific choices of activity, such as training, workers mobilisation or campaigning. They are also used to describe how, and why, we think these activities can lead to the fulfilment of a short- or medium-term objective. This objective is within the project's direct or indirect sphere of influence.

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Typically, a project-level theory of change elaborates how – and why – a specific project is likely to contribute to one or more outcome categories in a program theory of change, as illustrated in figure – Project level ToC – below.

One of the outcome categories in the program level theory of change in figure 3 was that 'Female workers organise and are equally represented in all union structures

Typically, a project theory of change would identify the preconditions – or changes – that would be necessary to achieve this situation, in each project. The example in figure 5 has for instance identified four such preconditions (or changes). There are probably more.

Project-level theories of change are very practical. They challenge us to think about and explain how – and why – the training, mobilisation and advocacy we make, are likely to lead to the desired change(s). It invites us to reflect critically on the results of our work and to use our past experiences of how our work contributed – or not –t o change, in similar actions in the past. This experience can inform our future work.
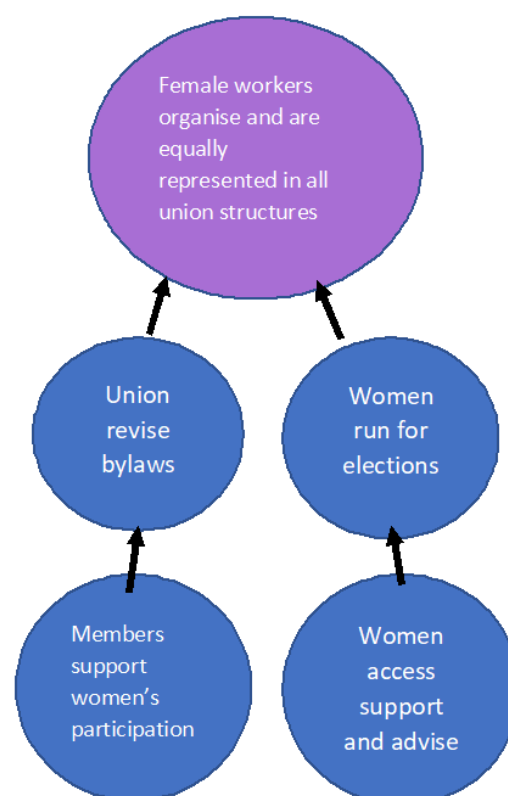
Project level theories of change rarely necessitates 'big picture' thinking or comprehensive analysis about the political or economic context. Yet, it is important to understand the context wherein the project operates, as well as the stakeholders' interests and concerns, and how gender, class and power dynamics affect men and women's interests and opportunities to participate in and make use of the project activities. This understanding will enable us to

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design more realistic theories of change, and to plan our activities in a way that considers these differences and contextual factors.

In the Table below, gives an overview of the differences and similarities between theories of change, at the three levels described in this section.

	Focus	Purpose	Time span
Organisational TOC	**Conceptual:** How does structural change take place in our sphere of interest?	Used to communicate and legitimise an organisation 's mission and focus	Usually, 10-15 years
Program TOC	**Less conceptual/more operational:** How does change happen in the sector or country we are focusing on?	Used to inform the choice of strategy and interventions	Usually 3-5 years. Contribution might be hard to assess as there are often multiple actors and factors involved Verification necessitates a contribution analysis.
Project TOC	**Operational:** How does change take place in our project/within our sphere of direct or indirect influence? How do we facilitate this change?	Used to guide our choice of activities and project implementation on a day-to-day basis	Follows the life-time of a project, but should be reviewed and revised as part of the project's implementation's ongoing monitoring This is done by asking the question: Does change really happen the way we planned?

> *Exercise # 2*
>
> Recall: What is your organisation's mission? And what is its Vision? (Note: some organisations use the word 'long term purpose' instead of vision).
>
> What do the mission and vision tell you about your organisation's implicit theory of change?
>
> TiP: Use the following formula to formulate your organisation's theory of change: My organisation's work is built on the (implicit) theory of change/rationale that if we do (insert formulations from your mission statement) then this will result in (insert formulations from your vision statement. This is so because…….

The principles and ideas described here apply to all three levels, because this document focuses primarily on theory of change as an approach to thinking and reflection. In the following pages, we will demonstrate how the approach applies to project-level theories of change. We will invite the you to practice the approach on one of your own actions or projects.

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4. What is 'a change' in a theory of change approach?

Most dictionaries define 'a change' *as an act or process through which something becomes different*.

For example, this could be a change from a situation, where workers are excluded from discussions about occupational health and safety to a situation where their voices are heard. Or a situation, where women remain silent about harassment at their workplace to a situation, where they complain to the union or management about the harassment they experience.

An activity, i.e. a meeting, a training session, or trade union support is NOT a change in itself. Workshops, meetings, training, or counselling sessions are 'just' activities that are happening, whether intended or unintended. There is no guarantee that the activity will make a difference for anyone. However, if the activity is relevant to the target group and implemented effectively, then it might contribute to or lead to a change.

In social and political work – which is the subject of trade union's operations – 'change' takes place among organisations, social structures, cultural patterns, individuals and institutions, and almost always belongs to one of the categories, listed in Table 2, below.

Change category	Example
Knowledge	Workers know where to seek help, if they have been subjected to exploitation
Perceptions	Male trade union leaders perceive female leaders as equals
Skills	Activists and leaders can communicate effectively and speak in front of big constituencies
Behaviour	Workers become political active and cast their vote in elections Workers speak out against injustice
Relations	Workers trust and support each other in trade unions
Circumstances	Workers access legal counselling and support CBA negotiations and related processes recognise that women's voices and concerns must be an integrated part of the bargaining GBV in the world of work is prohibited by law
Conditions	Employment conditions are permanent (as opposed to casual)

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	Work places have air conditioning and clean toilets that can accommodate all workers
Status (formal and informal entitlements)	Female garment workers working from at home are entitled to social benefits if they fall sick
Practices	LIs take precautions to guarantee worker's privacy and right to confidentiality, when they file a complaint
Policies and laws	Government passes laws that stress worker's right to freedom of association.

How to formulate a 'change':

Words form reality. Thus, to understand the change to which we want to contribute, it is important that, at the minimum, we know and describe:

- Who changes?
- What changes?

Because words form reality, it is also important to avoid ambiguous terminology that is open to interpretation, such as 'empowerment, participation, engage or resilience'.

Imagine you are going to New York for a holiday. Upon arrival, and after you pick up your suitcase, you leave the airport and take a taxi. You ask the driver to take you to New York City (This is our 'objective' or end goal). The driver will ask you where exactly in NY you want to go. Imagine what happens if you are unable to provide him with the address?

You are right; in that case the driver will not know where to take you. Or he might take you to a place he defines as the city centre and leave it up to you to find your way from there.

Unfortunately, too many project objectives or changes to be achieved are like the traveller who is unable to tell the taxi driver the exact end destination. They are vague and imprecise, and the statements are open to interpretation.

The first column in Table 2, below, provides examples of objectives (end changes) that are imprecise. The second column explains what needs to be specified. The last column offers an alternative wording.

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Example	Questions for clarification	Revised goal/change
Participating unions' membership has increased and they have better organizational capacity	➢ What does 'increase' mean? ➢ What does 'organisational capacity' mean? What can or will organisations do, when they have this capacity?	All local trade unions have increased their membership by xx% and a membership database that is updated regularly. Procedures and communication systems that allows union leaders to communicate regularly and effectively with their members are in place.
Increased gender equality within the union's at national and local level,	➢ What does 'increased' mean? ➢ What does 'within the union' mean?	Trade unions define a quota to ensure that the trade union board and all sub committees include at least two female representatives
Migrant workers have improved working conditions	➢ What does 'improved' mean? ➢ What kind of working conditions?	Migrant workers are working max. 10 hours per day and are equipped with PPEs.

The easiest way to formulate a clear statement of change/objective is to formulate it in a present, active tense and to start the sentence with a subject (who changes) and continue to explain what changes. The revised goals/change statements in the table above are formulated with these principles in mind.

Textbox 1: Tips to formulate objectives/final changes:

Ambiguous language: Words such as 'participation', 'empowerment', or 'resilience' are ambiguous and open to interpretation. Avoid them.

Simplicity: Avoid congested statements that contain several changes or causal links, all lumped together

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Exercise #3

Your work also contributes to change. Use the empty table below to add examples of the changes in worker's or other stakeholders' knowledge, perceptions, and behavior etc. to which your work has contributed. Formulate the sentences in the present tense and start with the Subject (who changes), followed by a verb and an object (what changes). You can use the examples in Table two as inspiration.

Change	Example
Knowledge	
Perceptions	
Skills	
Behaviour	
Relations	
Circumstances	
Conditions	
Status	
Practices	
Policies and laws	

Exercise # 4

Think about a project you are about to plan. How would you like the situation to look, once the project has been implemented successfully? You may use the change categories, described in table 2, as inspiration, when you formulate the change you want to see.

Formulate this change using the 'formula': Who has changed and what has changed, when and where, once the project is implemented?

What is a 'change pathway'?

A change pathway is a graphical illustration that explains the link between different, incremental changes towards an end goal – or objective.

More than half of us process information based on what we see.[1] We need to see things to understand them. Therefore a graphical change pathway – made up of 'building blocks of incremental changes' as illustrated in figure 6 above – is a useful tool that helps facilitate our critical thinking about how – and why – we think we can achieve a desired change.

The ultimate change that we want to create is rarely made up of one activity only. Often, it is necessary to create several, smaller or incremental changes, to reach the final change. We can develop change pathways, which illustrate how we think small scale changes lead to our final change, in order to understand the overall process of the change.

Example: The change pathway to reducing COVID-19 (and avoid that health care systems break down)

In 2020, the world was hit by a new Coronavirus and a global pandemic followed. In response, all nations around the world invested billions of dollars to prevent the spread of the virus and to save lives. Their objective (boxes 1 and 2) was to reduce the prevalence of the virus and to prevent health systems from collapsing, as they attempted to care for the critically ill.
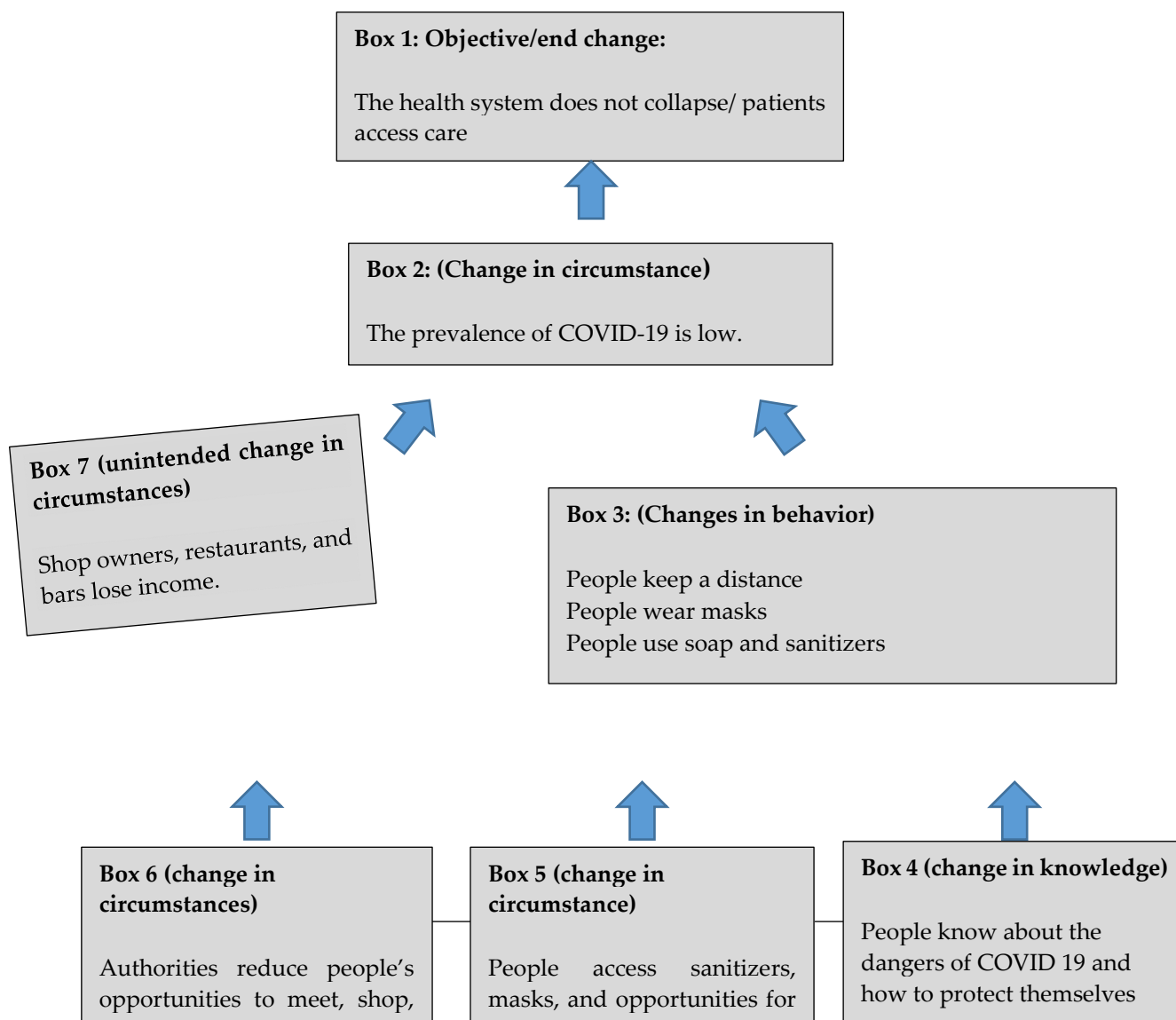
Governments reached differently, but most initiated huge awareness-raising campaigns to achieve this goal. This was based on a belief (implicit theory of change) that if people knew about the health risks to themselves or others, of COVID-19 (box 4), then they would change their behavior (box 3); i.e. keep a distance, observe good hygiene and wear masks.

However, after these authorities implemented their awareness raising campaigns, they soon realised that the population was not changing its behavior, even though it knew about social distancing, sanitizers, and masks. Other incremental changes were necessary to facilitate the desired behavior change.

The explanation was simple: it turned out that some population groups did not have access to water, sanitizers and/or masks. Others lived under such crowded conditions that social

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[1] 65 percent of us are **visual learners**, according to the Social Science Research Network.

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distancing was impossible, even if people were infected. Consequently, these circumstances that different from the original thinking which the campaign had to make available too, to enable the population to turn knowledge into behaviour. **(Box 5)**.

Box 1: Objective/end change:

The health system does not collapse/ patients access care

Box 2: (Change in circumstance)

The prevalence of COVID-19 is low.

Box 7 (unintended change in circumstances)

Shop owners, restaurants, and bars lose income.

Box 3: (Changes in behavior)

People keep a distance
People wear masks
People use soap and sanitizers

Box 6 (change in circumstances)

Authorities reduce people's opportunities to meet, shop,

Box 5 (change in circumstance)

People access sanitizers, masks, and opportunities for

Box 4 (change in knowledge)

People know about the dangers of COVID 19 and how to protect themselves

Yet, the pandemic kept spreading, and authorities realised that knowledge and access to sanitizers, masks, and opportunities for social distancing were still not sufficient to reduce the disease's prevalence down and to reach their objective. Perhaps this happened because the population developed a kind of 'Corona fatigue' and stopped listening to all the campaigns. So, all over the world we saw governments initiating yet another change. They closed shops, banned public gatherings, and – in some cases – ordered people to stay indoors **(Box 6).** Some

had done so from the very beginning, so it is safe to argue that they had followed a different theory of change all along-

The example of the COVID-19 pathway to reduce or control the spread of the disease illustrates that:

> Change processes, towards an end objective, rarely consist of one change only, but of several, incremental changes – for instance, in people's knowledge, behavior, or the circumstances that surround them.
> Change is rarely linear. Sometimes, several, interlinked changes at the same level are necessary **(as with Boxes 4, 5 and 6)** to achieve an upper-level change (Box 3).
> Reflecting on change is an ongoing process. Authorities all over the world learned as they were implementing their efforts to reduce the spread of the Coronavirus. They initiated lockdowns, only after they realised that the other changes they could stimulate – through awareness raising and providing masks and sanitizers – were not sufficient to reduce the prevalence. Lockdowns were a 'last resort', as this option was associated with lots of unintended consequences (changes); e.g., a reduced income for shop owners, who had to close their shops; loneliness; and a lack of motivation among students, who had to resort on online learning, to name but a few **(Box 7).**

How to create a pathway for change

A pathway for change can help you to reflect on how you think you can reach your desired changes. However, in order to create one, it is essential that you start by formulating the change that you imagine you'll see, once your project has been successfully implemented. As explained in Section 4.1, it is important to be as specific as possible. Without a specific end change (objective) we will be like the taxi driver in the airport, who can plan the route only if the passenger instructs him exactly where to go.
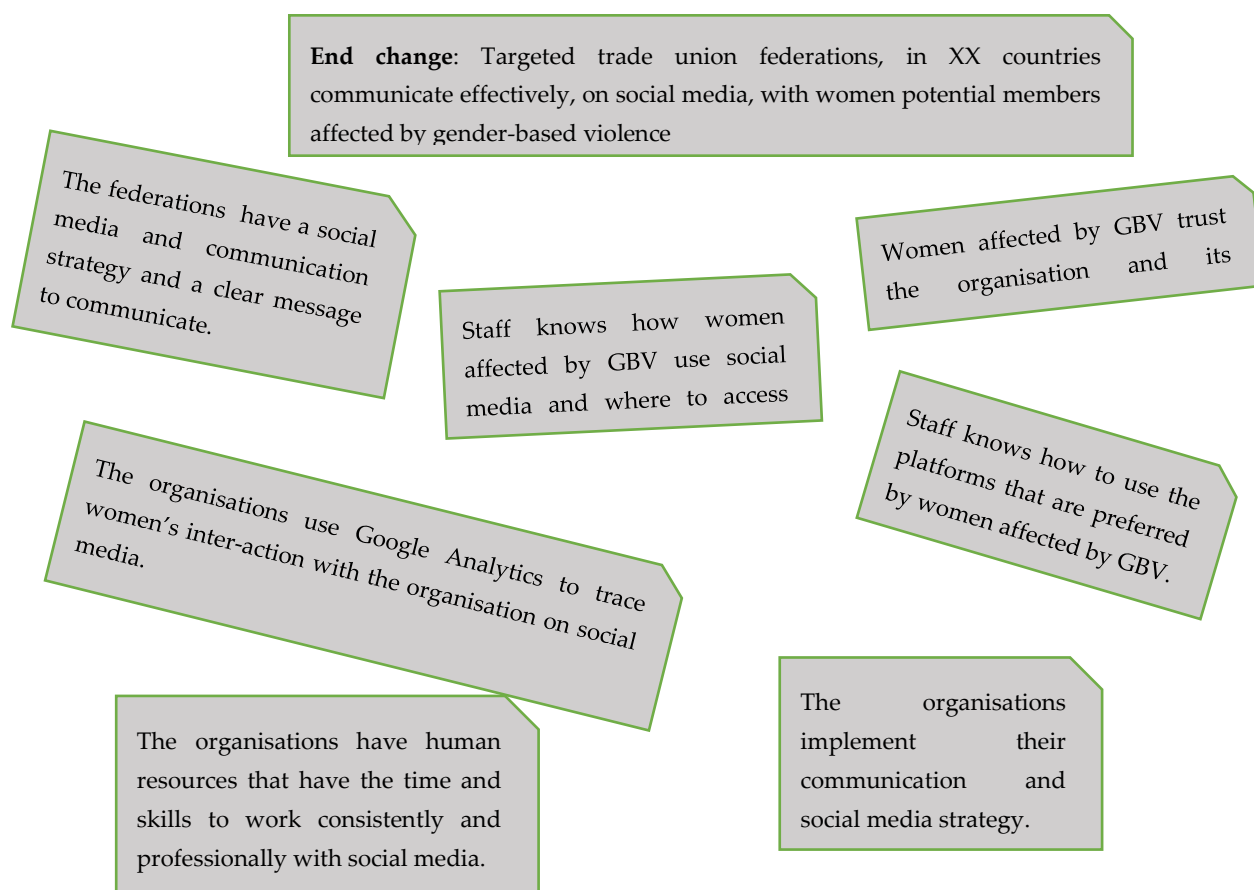
Step 1: formulate the change

Step one, in a ToC pathway is to formulate the end change, or objective. What does the situation look like, once you have succeeded in your work?

Step 2: brainstorm intermediate changes
Step two resembles step one: Now you need to brainstorm all intermediate changes that you think will be necessary to achieve your goal. You do this the same way as you formulated the

end change/objective. That is, you create sentences, which explain who changes, and what changes, and which. Avoid ambiguous language and fluffy terms.

The illustration below shows the changes, which might be necessary, to reach a situation where organisations communicate effectively, on social media, with women affected by gender-based violence.

End change: Targeted trade union federations, in XX countries communicate effectively, on social media, with women potential members affected by gender-based violence

The federations have a social media and communication strategy and a clear message to communicate.

Women affected by GBV trust the organisation and its

Staff knows how women affected by GBV use social media and where to access

Staff knows how to use the platforms that are preferred by women affected by GBV.

The organisations use Google Analytics to trace women's inter-action with the organisation on social media.

The organisations implement their communication and social media strategy.

The organisations have human resources that have the time and skills to work consistently and professionally with social media.

Exercise # 5

Look at the objective you formulated in Exercise # 4. Brainstorm all of the changes that you think are necessary to achieve this final change. (If you wish, use the change categories in table two as inspiration). We recommend that you use Post-Its and that you write one change statement per sheet. You can use the Post-Its to create 'pathways of change' later on.

NB: at this stage do not think or talk about activities. Forget any discussions about training, meetings, or campaigns. Focus only on the changes that are necessary to achieve your objective (final change).

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Step 3: Organise the intermediate changes into 'pathways of change'

When you have exhausted the thinking about what changes are necessary to lead to your end change/end destination, then it's time to organise them into change pathways, to clarify how changes are connected.

It's useful to think backwards, because – at this stage – you still don't know where you have to start. You only know what you want the end situation (objective) to look like once you are finished.

1) Look at the Post-Its. Identify the change – or changes – that must happen, just before you reach the final change.
2) Then, identify the changes that must take place before those changes, and then before those.

The illustration, overleaf, demonstrates what the result of this exercise will look like, using the example from earlier.

The final changes – which must take place in order to achieve a situation, where trade unions communicate effectively with women, affected by GBV – might be that:

A) The targeted women trust the trade unions and their message. If they didn't, they wouldn't listen to them.
B) The trade union federations implement a communication and social media strategy and work according to it. To be able to do this, the strategy must carry a clear message and reflect a solid understanding of how women, affected by GBV, use social media and the capacity of local trade unions.
C) The organisations use Google Analytics, so they can trace how the women they target interact with their own social media platforms, and so that they can continue to adjust and adapt their communication according to their findings.

Now, these three changes can only place, if the unions have human resources that have the time and skills to work consistently and professionally with social media, and if the staff possesses sufficient knowledge of the women's use of social media platforms and how they themselves can use these platforms.

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While constructing the pathway, it also becomes clear that additional, intermediate, changes are necessary to ensure that women, who are affected by GBV, trust the messages they receive. Therefore, additional thinking is required, concerning the incremental changes that go into the theory of change pathway.

End change: Targeted trade unions communicate effectively, on social media, with women potential members affected by gender-based violence

C) The trade union federations use Google Analytics to trace women's inter-action with the organisation on social media.

B) The trade union federations implement their communication and social media strategy

A)   Women affected by GBV trust the trade unions and their messages

The trade union federations have a social media and communication strategy and a clear message to communicate

?

?

D) The trade union federations have human resources that have the time and skills to work consistently and professionally with social media

Staff knows how to use the platforms preferred by women affected by GBV

E) Staff knows how women affected by GBV use social media and where to access

Exercise # 6

Develop a pathway of change for one of your own projects.

Start with the last change that must take place, before the objective is achieved.

Then, ask yourself; what is/are the change(s) that must take place to achieve this change? Continue doing this until you have a pathway that you feel make sense.

You can test the logic and cohesion of your pathway by adding an 'only if' between the vertical boxes and read from the top down. Targeted trade unions communicate effectively, on social media, with women affected by gender-based violence ONLY IF:

> The organisations use Google Analytics to trace women's inter-action with the organisation on social media

>> AND IF

> the trade union federation implement their communication and social media strategy,

>> AND IF

> the women affected by GBV trust the trade union and their messages

The curved arrow in the illustration, overleaf, symbolises the 'only if' expression

5. Assumptions – roadblocks on our pathway to change?

We use assumptions to reflect critically on the validity of our pathway of change.

An assumption is a belief about a situation that we think exists. It should be relevant to our situation and theory of change. At the same time, it should be 'a critical ingredient' of the change process.

Assumptions are based in notions and ideas that are so familiar or internalised that we take them for granted. An example of such an assumption could be; 'Training and awareness-raising will lead men to change their minds about women's role and position in society'.

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Because we take our assumptions for granted, we may not even be aware of making them and, therefore, rarely question them.

Assumptions are often reinforced because they frame how we see and understand the world, and how we interpret and give meaning to our personal experiences. We are all biased.

However, our assumptions are not always valid. For example, we assume the light will come on when we switch on the electricity. We suddenly realise that this is an assumption, if the room stays dark and it raises a question about why this is happening. Therefore, surprises are interesting eye-openers about implicit assumptions.

Assumptions that are flawed are like 'red flags' or roadblocks on our pathways for change. They influence whether we will be able to progress from a lower-level change to an upper-level change, in those pathways. If we cannot mitigate flawed assumptions, as the first example below illustrates, then they will prevent us from reaching our ultimate goal. Sometimes, this means that we must revise both the strategy and our initial goal. At other times, we just need to adjust the strategy as in the example below:

Example: Flawed assumptions necessitate a revised strategy, but the goal remains the same

In 2019, an Indian labour rights' NGO planned a project that aimed to promote female textile workers knowing their labour rights and complaining about violations of such by their employers. However, female textile workers have little time to participate in any activities outside of work hours. Most work 10—12 hours a day and when they get home, they must cook, clean, and care for the family. Therefore it was a challenge to ensure the women could access the information.

In response, the NGO planned to reach out to women through a voice-response system that could be used on both smartphones and traditional button mobile phones, which are still highly prevalent in rural India. The idea was that women would call a number, free of charge, whenever they had time, to access information, file a complaint or just to listen to the complaints or reflections of other workers.

Translated into ToC language, we can say that the NGO's goal was to contribute to a situation where more female workers complained about violations of their work-related rights. The NGO's theory of change was that, if female workers used their mobile phones, and if – through their phones – they accessed information about their rights and how to file complaints, then more women would actually complain and protest about

the daily sexual harassment, late payments, denial of breaks and other violations they experienced.
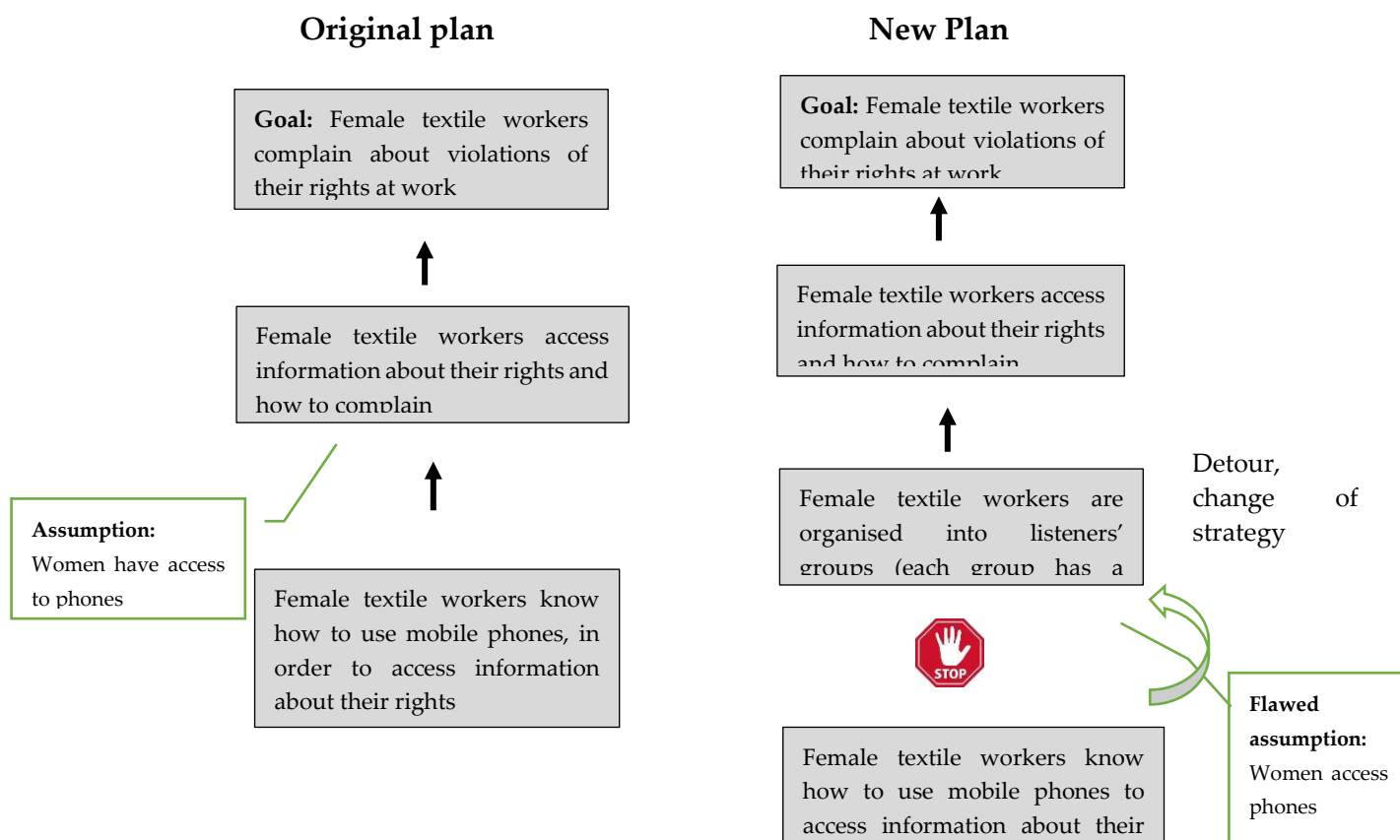
Unfortunately, there was a critical assumption in this theory of change that the NGO did not account for in the planning stage. As with so many – or most – actions involving women (and men), it is vital to understand the power and gender dynamics, and the patterns that affect women's opportunities and constraints.

The NGO's decision to use mobile phones, as a means of communication, did not consider whether – or to what extent –female textile workers had access to or controlled their own access to mobile phones. The NGO just *assumed* that the women *had* this access.

So, as soon as the NGO began to implement the project, its staff quickly realised that women's access to mobile phones could not be taken for granted. In other words, the basic assumption was problematic. Firstly, because many women in India do not have a phone at all, and rely borrowing one from their husbands, brothers, or grown-up sons. Secondly, it is in some communities considered culturally improper for women to speak on the phone.

This realisation led the NGO to revise their strategy. Instead of relying on women's access to mobile phones, the NGO organised women into local 'listeners groups' that met for 30 minutes every Sunday – the only day off – to listen to messages on the voice response system, and to reflect on the information jointly and to discuss any possible next steps. This approach also had the advantage that it provided a 'safe space' for women to build relationships and support each other. It also turned out that this strengthened their courage to file complaints.

Using a ToC pathway, the change in strategy looks like this:

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Original plan   ## New Plan

Goal: Female textile workers complain about violations of their rights at work

Goal: Female textile workers complain about violations of their rights at work

Female textile workers access information about their rights and how to complain

Female textile workers access information about their rights and how to complain

Assumption:
Women have access to phones

Female textile workers know how to use mobile phones, in order to access information about their rights

Female textile workers are organised into listeners' groups (each group has a

Detour, change of strategy

Flawed assumption:
Women access phones

Female textile workers know how to use mobile phones to access information about their

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Exercise # 7

Think of a situation in your own life: This could be in your private life or in one of your projects at work.

Identify 2-3 examples where an assumption – a belief about a situation you thought was in place – turned out to be flawed. What did you do? Did you revise the objective or did you change the strategy, so you could still reach your goal?

How do we use assumptions during planning and implementation?

As described above, an assumption is a belief about a situation we think exists. It should be relevant to how we think we can achieve our change. At the same time, it should be 'a critical ingredient' of the change process.

When we develop our pathways of change, our assumptions are fully active. They concern the cause-effect link between lower and upper-level changes, as well as the conditions needed

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for change to occur. These assumptions represent our expectations of what will happen, so they merit critical questioning. This sections describe how you do that.

Assumptions relate to:

 ➢ The context: The political, climatic, or health environment in which we implement our project,
 ➢ The stakeholders: The men, women affiliated to the trade union that we target with our efforts (understanding the gender and power dynamics between stakeholders is therefore vital),
 ➢ The intervention itself: (Do we invest the correct, and/or sufficient, resources)

In the example above about female textile workers, the stakeholder made the flawed assumption: the women who were targeted did not have unrestricted access to phones, as originally assumed. This necessitated a change in the project theory of change and the strategy.

Assumption or risk, what is the difference?

Risks can – just like assumptions – jeopardize our planning. But unlike assumptions – that we can address and mitigate – risks represent factors situations that we can hardly do anything about.

It can therefore sometimes be difficult to distinguish a risk from an assumption, and vice versa.

As the example illustrates, it is impossible to predict all of the assumptions that may disturb or even jeopardise a change pathway. Yet, it is still useful to reflect upon the unspoken assumptions that guide our planning during the planning process itself.

Identifying which assumptions are 'critical ingredients', to the change process we want to realise, enables us to already revise the pathway for change during the planning process itself, if we realise the assumption is flawed.

In other situations, we may not know an assumption is flawed, and it is possible that we will only find out after we have started implementing the project. In such situations, we should include the assumption in the monitoring framework and assess it as part of the ongoing monitoring. If it turns out to be flawed, we can address it and revise our theory of change accordingly. Just as the Indian labour rights' organisation did.

The figure, below, illustrates how we can work with assumptions during the planning and implementation of a project, and what we can do, if an assumption turns out to be flawed, unconfirmed, or confirmed.

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If the assumption is.......

- **Flawed:** Stop. Revise the change pathway

- **Unconfirmed:** Slow down. Monitor it during
  implementation. Revise the pathway if it
  turns out to be flawed.
  Continue if it is confirmed.

- **Confirmed:** Go on. There is no need to revise
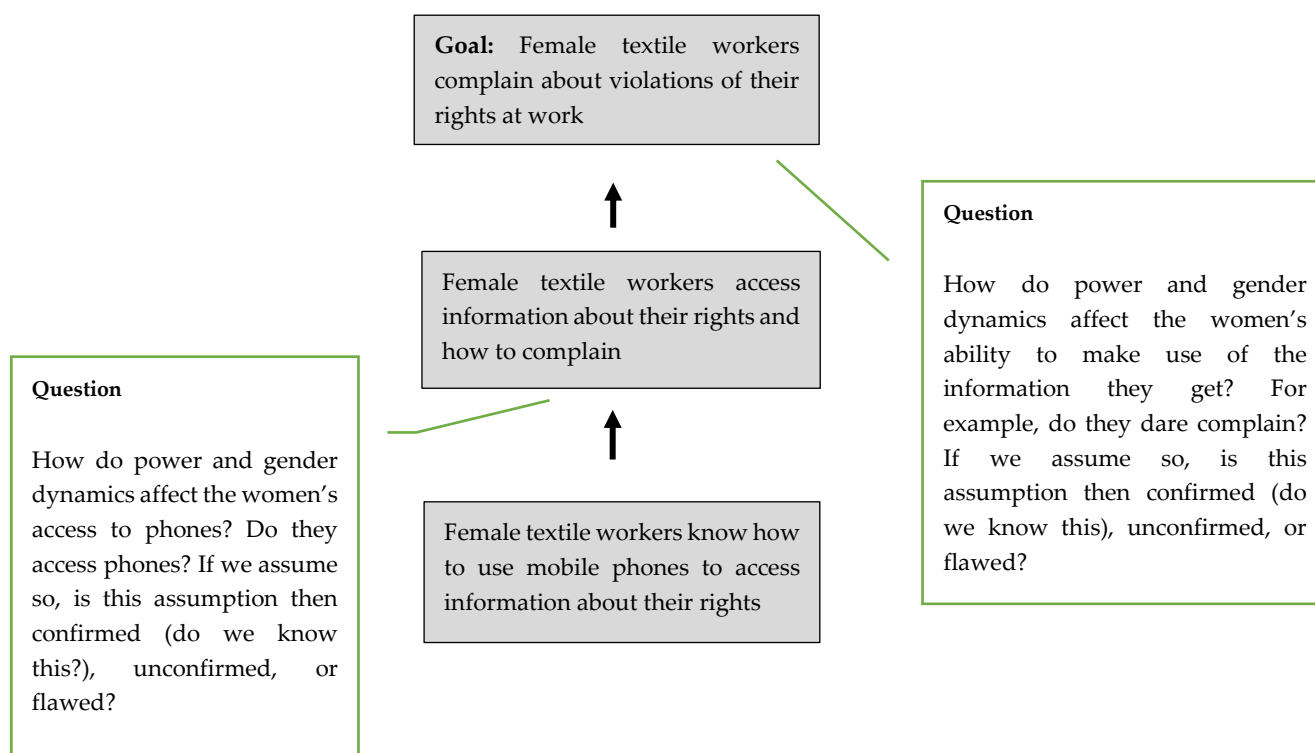 your pathway and change your plans.

How do we identify assumptions?

A simple way to identify assumptions is to ask critical questions about the stakeholders' interests and needs, and the power and gender dynamics that relate to each change pathway.

Table 2, below, provides an overview of questions that can help identify assumptions:

Assumptions related to . . .	Questions that can help identify assumptions
The context	➢ How do factors in the context (e.g., conflict, political developments, natural disasters, and the economy) affect the likelihood that we can achieve this change? ➢ Have we thoroughly considered these factors in the design of our pathway for change?
The stakeholders	➢ How do the stakeholders' interests, needs, and concerns affect the likelihood that the action will produce the desired change? ➢ How do the power dynamics between the project's stakeholders affect the likelihood that we can produce the desired change? ➢ Have we thoroughly considered the stakeholders' interests and needs, as well as the power dynamics, in the design of our pathway?
The intervention itself	Do we have sufficient financial and human resources to produce this change?

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The pathway, below, illustrates how an understanding of gender and power can contribute to identifying assumptions, including those that need monitoring during the project's implementation. We have used the example from India that was described earlier.

Goal: Female textile workers complain about violations of their rights at work

Female textile workers access information about their rights and how to complain

Female textile workers know how to use mobile phones to access information about their rights

Question

How do power and gender dynamics affect the women's access to phones? Do they access phones? If we assume so, is this assumption then confirmed (do we know this?), unconfirmed, or flawed?

Question

How do power and gender dynamics affect the women's ability to make use of the information they get? For example, do they dare complain? If we assume so, is this assumption then confirmed (do we know this), unconfirmed, or flawed?

Exercise # 8

Look at the pathway you developed in Section 4.

Identify your assumptions (beliefs about a situation you think exists) about the context, the stakeholders and the intervention itself. You can do this, by asking questions, as illustrated in the pathway above.

Write the assumptions down and order them into three groups: flawed, unconfirmed and confirmed.

Revise your pathway so it considers the flawed assumptions.

Insert the unconfirmed assumptions into your monitoring framework. You need to look out for them as you implement your project.

6. Narratives

A narrative TOC is a communications tool that summarises the TOC pathway into brief, easy-to-read, and easy-to-understand text. This narrative describes the overall logic of your action, that is: how and why you think you will achieve a desired change.

The narrative is also the ultimate 'test' of your thinking and belief'. If you can't explain how, and why, you think you can achieve your goal, in a few sentences; then, the likelihood that you can actually do it is equally low.

There is no 'fixed' formula for how to formulate a ToC narrative. Notwithstanding that, we can say that a clear narrative ToC includes:

> ➤ A description of the objectives/end change
> ➤ A summary of the activities, and how – and why – these activities and their related intermediate outcomes/changes will add up to the desired objective. You can construct sentences using the 'if…. Then…. Because…… formula introduced in Exercise 1
> ➤ A summary of the key, unconfirmed assumptions, which need to be monitored during implementation, and which may cause the strategy (and change pathway to change) if they turn out to be flawed.

The narrative for the theory of change for female textile workers that we describe in section six could for instance be as follows:

Objective: Female textile workers take collective action to protect their rights

Summary: To achieve this objective, the project will establish a mobile driven communication platform where workers can access information about worker's rights and where to call in case their rights, e.g. to overtime payment, to a contract or maternity leave is violated. In addition, the project conduct awareness raising among workers so they know how to use their mobile phones to use the platform

The project's rationale (theory of change) is therefore that:

If workers know how to use their mobile phones to access information about their rights, then they will access this information and use it to complain in situations where they experience that their rights are violated. This is so, because the information will offer them an opportunity and means to act, which they did not have before.

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The feasibility of the intervention logic is based on the assumptions that:

- *women have access to mobile phones.*
- *women trust the platform and the information they access.*
- *women overcome fears of retaliation and adverse consequences if they complain.*

Exercise # 9

Formulate a narrative for the pathway you developed in Exercise # 7

Use the 'if……. Then…… because….. formula, if you prefer to.

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7. Theory of Change Pathway or Logical Framework. How are they linked?

A theory of change approach focuses on HOW and WHY change takes place. It is concerned with the causal relations *between* the changes in a change pathway, and with how one change (e.g. in knowledge or attitudes) leads to upper-level changes. Its main purpose is learning and understanding. The approach embraces complexity and leaves room for as many changes as are necessary to reach a desired objective (end change).

A theory of change approach to planning does not distinguish narrowly between a change, an objective, an outcome, an output indicator, a milestone or a result. A 'change' can be an outcome, an indicator, an output or an objective, depending on where in the change process the change occurs. The final change in a process of change will usually be the desired end situation or objective – or the condition of things you aim for.

Figure 5, below, illustrates the link between a 'change' and the terminologies that are used in a logical framework approach.

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Figure 5: Changes have many names
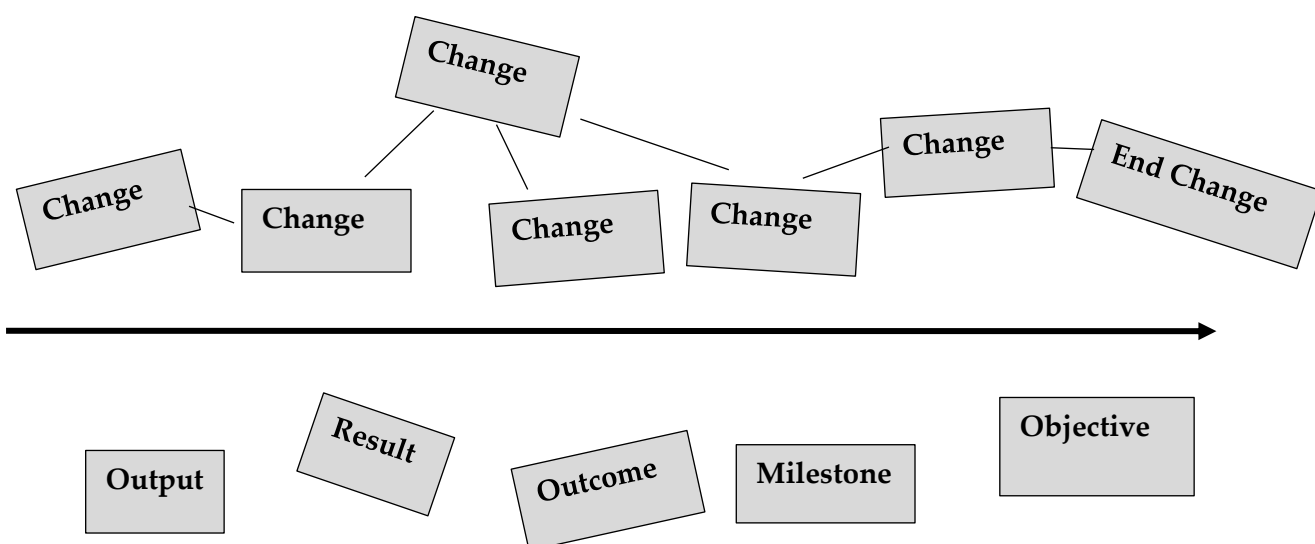
On the other hand, a Logical Framework focuses of WHAT changes (outcomes or outputs) and on what activities an action will deliver. Its main purpose is accountability and overview.

The three result levels of the Logframe (output, outcome, objective) leave no room for intermediate steps or changes, as in a theory of change approach. This pushes the users to make wide conceptual leaps and does not encourage them to question the feasibility and/or plausibility of the envisaged change process. A logical framework approach pays limited attention to the assumptions, underlying the strategic thinking, or the assumed causal relations between result levels.

The two approaches are, or can be, complementary, however, as they fulfil different tasks and/or answer different questions in the planning process and during the project's implementation.

	Questions asked in a logical framework approach	Questions asked in a ToC approach
Planning questions	➤ What is our objective? ➤ What are the outcomes, outputs, and activities? ➤ What are our assumptions about the context?	➤ What change do we want to see? ➤ How – and why – do we think we can achieve this change? ➤ What are our assumptions about the context, the stakeholders, and the intervention itself, which we need to monitor during the implementation?
Monitoring questions	➤ Did we conduct activities as planned? ➤ Did we produce outputs and outcomes as planned? ➤ How did our assumptions about the context influence the implementation of our program?	➤ Did we conduct activities as planned? ➤ What changes, expected or unexpected, do we see because of our work, so far? ➤ How and to what extent do these changes add up to upper-level changes and to our objective ➤ Are our assumptions about the context, the stakeholders, and the intervention still valid? ➤ Based on what we know now, are other changes necessary – which we didn't think of initially – to achieve the goal? Does the change pathway need revision?

A theory of change pathway can inform a logical framework, although the three result levels of the Logframe (output, outcome, objective) leave no room for intermediate changes.

A theory of change approach helps us identify *what* changes we need to produce and why we need to produce them (and not some other changes). Lower-level changes in a change pathway (often related to changes in knowledge or skills) may translate into outputs in a logical framework, whereas upper-level changes in a change pathway can be translated into outcomes or indicators.

The figure below, illustrates how a ToC pathway can inform (and improve) a logical framework.

Theory of Change   **Logical Framework**
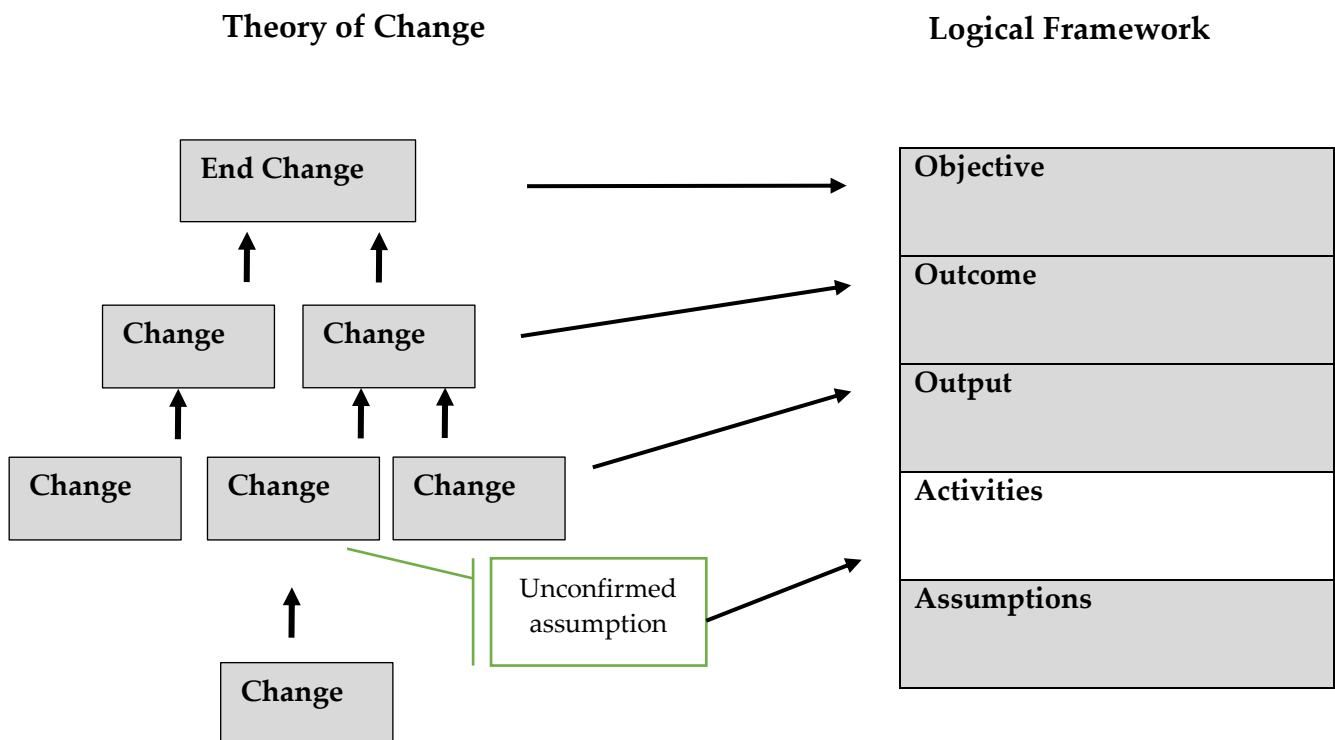
Exercise # 10

Convert the ToC pathway into an LFA.

After you have done this, identify the activities that are necessary to achieve the desired changes.

8. Final remarks

This document offers an introduction to theory of change as an approach to reflection and learning. The approach applies to project planning, but could well be used in any sphere of life, where we want to assess the logic and feasibility of what we do critically.

A theory of change approach is an ongoing process of reflection. We adjust and revise as we learn from our experience, and as we realise that our assumptions are flawed, or that there were critical factors that we didn't consider in the planning stage. As such, there is no such thing as a 'perfect' theory of change.

The best theories of change are, in fact, those that 'remain in progress' and which are subject to regular reflection and critical scrutiny.

You do not need to call in a large group of experts; nor do you need to arrange week-long workshops (although that might be useful once in a while). It could well be a process that you initiate and facilitate during a 30-minute staff meeting, or for ten minutes as you and a colleague are taking a coffee break in the office kitchen.

What is essential about the process is that you stick to the main questions:

- ➢ What is the change we want to create (not are creating?)
- ➢ How – and why – do we think we can achieve, or have contributed to, this change?
- ➢ What are the assumptions and 'yellow' traffic lights we need to look out for in the process?

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