

Mapping a theory of change: some practice pointers

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There are already several helpful guides to developing theories of change, including those produced by New Philanthropy Capital and Nesta. The international development arena also has a wealth of experience of using theories of change, rich learning from which is captured in Isabel Vogel's 2012 '*Review of the use of 'Theory of Change' in international development.*' These further practice pointers draw on my personal experience of supporting a variety of organisations - from early years providers to housing associations to infrastructure bodies - on their theory of change journey.

1. Mapping a theory of change as a collective exercise.

Theories of change are best developed through dialogue. Indeed, the dialogue *itself* is invaluable in building a strong shared understanding of goals and underlying assumptions and embedding a culture of thinking critically about what you are doing and why. A half day workshop for a dozen or so staff, trustees and volunteers is a useful way to start. After that the conversation can usefully be expanded - e.g. with a follow up session to refine the first 'cut' - and/or by opening up the conversation to a wider group of stakeholders (including commissioners) who will bring their own distinctive insights.

2. Preparing participants for what's coming

A short briefing note circulated ahead of time can help to demystify theories of change, whilst also encouraging participants to reflect on key questions in advance.

3. Reflecting the experience of service users

It seems self-evident that service user input is key to developing a theory of change that is credible and authentic. Generally speaking, I've found that service user voices come across most clearly not when they are part of a wider theory of change workshop, but rather by creating opportunities for service users to describe the changes they experience in whatever ways work best for them, encouraging creative self-expression.

4. The narrative is key

I've seen some theories of change that consist of beautiful schematics but lack a detailed (or even cursory) explanation of the evidence or assumptions on which the theory is based: what it is that gives the organisation confidence that their approach helps bring about the changes sought. The narrative is the toughest bit and often requires a bit of digging to unearth the evidence and expose the key assumptions. But it's this theoretical underpinning that gives a theory of change 'bite', not least by highlighting links with relevant academic research on which your approach is built, or that you need to take on board. The narrative is also key in pointing up new avenues for development.

5. Capturing the essence of how you do things

How an organisation does things can often be just as important as what they do. Being explicit about this in a theory of change can put a spotlight on important aspects of culture and behaviour that need to be nurtured and celebrated.

6. Enablers

Enablers - or the critical success factors on which success depends warrant close attention. A theory of change may well surface enablers that receive relatively little attention, but have potential to be show-stoppers (and not in a good way).

7. Mapping a theory of change for a new project, or linking it with strategy development

Sometimes a theory of change for a whole organisation can be too much to take on or a view may be taken that the time isn't right. Introducing a discipline of mapping a theory of change when designing a new project can be a helpful place to start. It's a basic building block of project design and colleagues will recognise its benefit. There's also a strong case for looking at Theories of Change as part of strategic planning exercises, since the analysis involved often points up future development priorities.

8. Perfection is a thing not to be achieved

The search for perfection can be paralysing and deter people from starting on the journey. It also implies a degree of certainty that doesn't exist and risks seeing the theory of change as something set in stone when it can and should change in the light of experience and evidence. My top tip is - just get started! The main message from international development colleagues is that 'if handled lightly as a flexible way to think through fundamental questions about programmes' theories of change can 'create better informed hypotheses of change, inspire innovations and improvements in programme strategies, and strengthen the potential of programmes to support the development outcomes they seek.' My own experience bears this out.

At Eastside Primetimers we understand that measuring and managing social impact is about much more than putting in new systems, frameworks and processes. It needs leadership, vision and clear communication. We are pleased to have supported a range of social organisations to strengthen their impact measurement, both as an approved provider for the Impact Readiness Fund and as an integral part of our work on investment readiness and organisational transformation under programmes such as [Big Potential](#). We are currently an approved Impact Management Provider for the [Access Impact Management Programme](#). Please contact us on 020 7250 8334 or email dawn@ep-uk.org for a conversation with our consultants about how we can help you better manage, measure and demonstrate your impact.